

Sermon: Trinity Sunday 2009...

Consubstantial, coeternal while unending ages run...

Today is the climax of the Christian Year, the mystical, mysterious festival of the Holy Trinity: the Being and Persons of God himself. I know that many good Christians think they can get by very nicely without bothering too much with this strange doctrine. And yes, it's perfectly acceptable simply to contemplate the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Ghost; and by this to mean that we believe we were created, redeemed and sanctified. Blaise Pascal in his night vision famously saw *not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*. But I wonder if, on this great festival, you will please allow me a little space to speak about the philosophical significance of our faith.

Christianity is of course a powerful moral force and I will come back to this later on. But the Christian Faith is a magnificent intellectual achievement which enabled us to think of the world in an entirely new and creative way. The early Fathers of the Church were among the greatest philosophers and intellects of all time. They lived in the first four centuries after Christ in a long period of moral decay and also of intellectual decay. And by their brilliance and tenacity, they showed us how to put this right.

Let us start then where the Fathers found themselves. The late Roman Empire was a polytheistic, pagan society. Worse it was in the grip of debilitating superstition. They worshipped many gods. This doesn't mean that they really imagined Zeus up in the sky or Neptune at the bottom of the sea – with special effects by Harry Harryhausen. They didn't think Pallas Athene and Aphrodite were supernatural women. What they actually thought was much worse, much more dangerous, far more intellectually debilitating, philosophically bankrupt.

Believing in many gods meant that they could not see the world as a unity. They had no concept of a unified world of nature. Everything was under the separate jurisdiction of what you might call the departmental gods. Without presupposing a unified world of nature you cannot have what we take for granted and that is natural science. What can you have instead? Well, you are forced to have what the Romans had: a belief in luck or fortune. Today we probably think there is such a thing as luck, but we see it for what it is: not an actual force – impersonal or personal – but simply chance, randomness, the way the cookie crumbles.

The poor benighted Roman pagans actually thought that luck was a real, positive or negative force – something like the force of gravity. And they went on to reason that your luck was your destiny: all in the hands of supernatural forces beyond your control. So they tried to understand, placate and manipulate these forces by means of astrology, runes, incantations, wizardry and witchcraft. There were lucky days and unlucky days – the Ides of March maybe. These notions cast the Romans into intellectual paralysis. What a horrible world in which the

whole of your life is controlled by capricious, often malevolent, and immutable forces of destiny and fate.

The Christian Fathers said that the world is not like that at all. They said the world was created by the one true God by the power of his Word, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. And they used the old Greek word for Word - *λογος* the very principle of reason which they said is from God and is God. By presupposing – though they didn't call it presupposing, they called it faith – by presupposing universal creative rationality, they rendered the world intellectually understandable. They laid down the basic intellectual foundation for natural science.

By contrast, our contemporary arguments about science versus religion are shallow, contemptible and childish. There is no conflict between science and Christianity. The conflict is between Christianity and ideological atheists such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and T.H. Huxley, right down to that prince bigot of our own time, Richard Dawkins. It is not only that there is no conflict between Christianity and science: without Christianity – specifically the doctrine of the Trinity - there would *be* no science. No other civilisation or culture, ancient or modern has invented science – only the Christianity of the early Fathers. This is because Christianity has declared since the opening verse of St John's Gospel that God is reasonable. And this reasonable God made the world in his own reasonable image: to be discovered and understood by the rationality he has implanted in us by his Spirit.

Specifically, as R.G. Collingwood pointed out in his *An Essay on Metaphysics*, it is the doctrine of the Trinity, as set out in The Athanasian Creed, which provides the paradigm that makes science possible:

By believing in the Father, the doctors of the church meant absolutely presupposing that there is a world of nature which is always and indivisibly one world. By believing in the Son they meant absolutely presupposing that this one natural world is nevertheless a multiplicity of natural realms. By believing in the Holy Ghost they mean absolutely presupposing that the world of nature, throughout its entire fabric, is a world not merely of things but of events or movements.

These presuppositions must be made, they said, by anyone who wished to be 'saved'; saved, that is to say, from the moral and intellectual bankruptcy, the collapse of science and civilisation, which was overtaking the pagan world.

It wasn't the barbarian invasions which brought down the Roman Empire: it was faulty metaphysics. And the men of the time, scholars, knew this. Again Collingwood explains this neatly for us:

Christian writers in the time of the Roman Empire asserted, and no historian today will deny, that in the late Roman time the metaphysics and civilisation were moribund. And because philosophy and civilisation, organised thought in its theoretical and practical forms, stand or fall together, the metaphysical error which killed pagan thought killed pagan civilisation with it. This metaphysical error was corrected by Christianity.

Specifically, the corrective was the doctrine of the Trinity: the unified but self-differentiating Being of God whose image, imprinted on the world, makes science possible. Don't take my word for it. Don't just take the word of a Christian priest. Listen to one of the most outstanding scientists of the last century, A.N. Whitehead, co-author with Bertrand Russell of *Principia Mathematica*. Whitehead said:

There is but one source for science: It must come from the Medieval insistence on the rationality of God.

I promised to come back to the moral consequences of metaphysical belief and I will – and then I'll finish. But I hope I've stimulated your appetite for approaching the philosophical significance of the doctrine of the Trinity and that we can return to it another day.

Remember I began by talking about the superstition of fate and destiny, of immutable supernatural causation by the whole panoply of pagan gods? If you are governed by fate, you are of course morally paralysed. What you do is useless. Everything is in the lap of the gods or written in the stars - or the entrails.

But the Gospels and St Paul came along and contradicted this with the basic moral vocabulary and rule of the Christian Faith. The word is *repentance*. In the original Greek μετανοια which means *change your mind*. So what you do does count. Repentance, the possibility of change, restores to us our moral integrity and gives us the ultimate ability to choose between good and bad. The Blessed Trinity is the only origin of all intellectual integrity and the possibility of morals.

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