

Trinity Sunday
Year C - 22/5/2016

Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31
Psalm 8
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Many of you who attend Morning Prayer will know that we are reading this year from the journals of Thomas Merton, the great spiritual guide of the 20th century. He had this to say about the doctrine of the Trinity...

“Ultimately we cannot imagine the connection between the two terms of the proposition: ‘In God there are Three Persons and One Nature.’ And it would be a great mistake to try.” When it comes to not understanding this impossibly difficult business of the Trinity, most of us here will heartily agree. But what does Merton mean when he says it would be a great mistake to try?

As children we first come to faith with total acceptance - it’s just a wonderful story and we receive it uncritically. ‘Of course it’s all true.’ But by teenage years the rational brain asserts itself and the question must come... ‘How can any of this be true?’ From this point onwards, the road forks in multiple different directions...

The most common response is rejection - ‘This is all nonsense.’ Most people walk away.

Some, however, manage to shelve the questions. Even though they live adult lives in every other capacity, they somehow stay as children in this one area... religion. ‘I don’t understand it, but I draw great comfort from it and so I keep turning up.’

Some are more pro-active, making a loudly proclaimed virtue of their non-rational faith. They invest a literal authority in text or institution that allows no questioning or doubt.

And in the second half of the 20th century, under the influence of Liberal Christianity, another new path emerged in which the rational mind is made king. Everything in the faith is weighed and sifted... through individual reason and experience. 'If I cannot understand it, I will not accept it.' It is not unusual in a parish like ours for people to say, 'I don't like reciting the Creed because I no longer believe it.'

But Thomas Merton is talking about something else again...

He's not speaking of a reversion to childhood... nor is he suggesting that we suppress our rational mind. He's not promoting fundamentalism. He's speaking of another way... a minority way... preserved throughout the long tradition of Christianity, and now in our time flowering again in green shoots of renewal. He's talking about the contemplative way... or if that sounds too off-putting... the way of journeying into deep mystery... the mystery that is God.

The contemplative way is not a suppression or denial of reason, critical thinking or rigorous questioning. The human mind is a wonderful part of our created glory. Our mind is part of who we are... and 'all of us' is necessary in our journey deeper into God.

But as much as it has its place, the human mind also has its limitations. There are places it cannot travel... indeed crucial places of human experience where it cannot help us.

The simplest example is the experience of love. We can use our mind to list all the reasons why we like a certain person - we can list all their attractive qualities and explain why we respond to them - but that rational exercise only takes us to the threshold of the experience called love. When we love someone, we find ourselves travelling in a mystery beyond rationality. "I can't explain why I feel this way... I just love you."

What is true of our experience of love is true of God. In the encounter with God, we confront a mystery where our rational mind can only take us so far... and we get to the point where we need to explore deep and mysterious water.

This journey into mystery starts with a rational statement of honesty - a statement that chills the heart of any Christian literalist - “whatever our mind can conceive and our words express, no matter how clever, creative and faithful, will be unable to contain the full truth and beauty of who God truly is”. Everything we say or write, no matter how brilliant, will always be a metaphor, an analogy, a pale approximation of the mystery that is God.

And so we need to go deeper than we can understand... indeed leaving behind all certainty and security to travel in unknowing. We need to leave behind the comfortable noise of words, and travel instead in silence. There comes a time when in order to travel deeper, we have to learn (especially in prayer and worship) to turn our mind off for a while... to calm and silence its ceaseless turning and chatter... so we can listen to something or Someone deeper...

The most helpful analogy for this journey is once again, the experience of human love. Every love comes to a time when you have to surrender to the pull of something unexplained. The landmarks slip away and we find ourselves in deep water... and all we can call it is... love. So it is with God - we find ourselves drawn into a deep sea, so much bigger than ourselves and our beliefs and ideas... and all we can call it is love. All we can call Him or Her is love.

The contemplative tradition speaks of the mystery of God as an abyss - there is no bottom. If God is inexpressible mystery - what's the point of theology... of doctrine... indeed of this belief we call the Trinity? Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a unity of One Nature... If we accept it as “only a pale analogy of the perfection that is God”... what's the point of having a doctrine at all?

Christian Wiman, the American poet who returned to faith later in life... with great questions in his heart and mind... says this,

“I have tried to learn the language of Christianity but often feel that I’ve made no progress at all... I (know) that my understanding must be forged and re-formed within the life of God, and dogma is a means of making this happen: the ropes, clips and toe spikes whereby one descends into the abyss.”

That would at least be the beginning of some tentative answer in response to that question... doctrine gives me something ‘sane and safe’ to hang onto as I explore the mystery of God.

But I’m content to listen to Merton’s wisdom, and not get too bogged down in it all, or tie myself up in knots. But I take comfort that in this, I’m in good company. The great Augustine of Hippo, concluded his ‘endlessly long’ book on the Trinity with these words, “We have said (all) this not in order to have said something, but in order not to have remained altogether silent.”

The Lord be with you.