

The Revd Professor Sarah Coakley
Trinity Sunday, Trinity College, Cambridge, June 7, 2009
Ezekiel 1. 4-10, 22-28a; Mark 1. 1-3

‘And immediately the Spirit driveth him out into the wilderness’ (Mk 1. 12)

May what I say be in God’s name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

*

I speak from your preacher’s desk, here on Trinity Sunday and in this college dedicated to the holy Trinity – a preacher’s desk which was given by a former Dean of this college, one who was my own teacher, Bishop John Robinson, someone to whom I owe a very great deal. A shy and gauche man who never quite became at ease at Cambridge high table events, Robinson came back to Cambridge, and to his post in Trinity, in 1969, after all the furore caused by his time as Bishop of Woolwich and the publication of his notable liberal manifesto, *Honest to God*. This little book of his, still his most famed work, is a text that encouraged the faithful to confront their doubts and even welcome them as a sign of growing up in the faith. It can scarcely be said to have majored therefore in an overt discussion of trinitarian orthodoxy – although significantly it did not say anything that was out of line with such. But Robinson certainly gave people permission in this book to question those aspects of traditional doctrine that they found arcane or obfuscating. Perhaps predictably, after all the excitement and scandal that *Honest to God* had caused in the press and beyond, Cambridge tended to treat Robinson with the coldness that it reserves for those it thinks have gained too easy public fame – he was a ‘popularist’, they said. This did not make his life in college easy, and his notable lack of social skills intensified the problem. I really do not know if the following anecdote about Robinson is true, but if it isn’t, it *should* be; and I offer it with the deepest affection and respect for Robinson’s memory, for it may serve as an appropriate opener for what I want to lay before you tonight on the difficult matter of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Bishop Robinson was dining at Lucy Cavendish college one evening, or so goes the story. As usual he was lost for conversation with the lady he found on one side of him and was scrambling for a point of contact. ‘What can you can tell me about Lucy Cavendish, your founder?’ barked Robinson, facing down the young woman don with an imperious gaze. ‘I really don’t know’, she replied, stammering, ‘You see I’ve only just become a fellow here’. ‘Well really’, said Robinson, blundering on: ‘surely you should be able to do better than that – can’t you tell me *anything* about the person for whom your college is named?’ Riled, but not missing a beat, the young woman recovered her poise and fired back with the sort of riposte that most of us only think up later in the bath: ‘And what about you, Bishop Robinson’, she retorted, ‘How much can you tell *me* about the divine persons for whom *your* college is named?’

The question remains; and presses especially tonight, on this feast-day of the Trinity. How much indeed can we say about the divine life of the Trinity - three persons in one substance – for whom this college is named? What, if any, cogency *can* be made of this doctrine today, and how, if at all, does it relate to the scriptural witnesses we have already heard tonight? It is that problem I want to confront head-on.

The two readings given in the lection present us with an apparently stark choice on this matter: the flight to divine ecstasy, on the one hand, or the human struggle with spiritual choice, on the other. Which of these is the best way *into* the doctrine of the Trinity?

Our OT reading from Ezekiel majors in mystical elevation: it records a prophetic vision, a searing glimpse into the nature of the divine, the ‘holy of holies’, first through the presence of four mysterious ‘living creatures’, who shield their faces before the divine throne, and then through the appearance of ‘something that seemed like a human form’ on that throne – the very ‘likeness of the glory of the Lord’. This so-called ‘chariot mysticism’ of Ezekiel’s vision, putting him alongside his predecessor Elijah as one specially chosen to be transported

into the very heavens, is amongst the most daring of OT biblical visions, for it risks the charge of idolatry by its very suggestion of a 'human form' on the throne. Yet, for all its daring in Jewish terms, it seems to present no convincing prescience of, yet alone argument for, the idea of God as *three* distinct '*persons*', as such. No, such is a later Christian re-reading of this text, a rich and beautiful one to be sure, but one already reflecting the period of achieved Trinitarian orthodoxy following the debates that climaxed in the fourth century, and reflecting too the eastern Eucharistic liturgy, with its emphasis on ascending into the heights of heaven, that had also grown up by then. We cannot *start* here, however, if we want to know why there is a doctrine of the Trinity at all (the sort of question Robinson would have pressed) – though we may well want to return here.

Our NT reading from the opening of the gospel of Mark seems in comparison somewhat flatfooted in its narrative form. Jesus is baptized in the Jordan by John, is named 'beloved Son' by a mysterious voice from heaven, and the Spirit descends on him as confirmation. But it's the next bit that is really interesting, and on which I want to focus: 'And immediately the *Spirit* driveth him out into the wilderness'. No time for mystical ecstasies here; the battle is immediately on with Satan for the human soul of Jesus. And yet it is precisely the same Spirit who confirmed Jesus's divine status, note, that drives him into this contested realm of decision - this realm of the sorting of his deepest motivations and desires. The divinely mandated, but no less human, Jesus goes straight into the wilderness of temptation and testing. This is what the perfect 'human form' *looks like*, Mark seems to say, when it is most deeply engaged with God on this earth, most deeply inflected and propelled by the Spirit, most deeply confirmed and sustained by the 'Father'. Here is the 'human face of God' – as John Robinson liked to speak of Jesus - strung between beasts and angels, between despair and hope.

In this most laconic, brief, and suggestive way, the gospel of Mark tells us of this dramatic start to Jesus's ministry. And we see, already, the implicitly 'trinitarian' shape of this confrontation, although Mark himself is of course very far from conscious of the later developed form of the doctrine. But something deeply important is happening here, which – significantly – the early church was later to feel great ambivalence about. To plot one's way into the Trinity this way – an existential way – via the agony of Jesus's human choice, via a maelstrom of conflicting desires, via a depth of human engagement with the Spirit, and on the edge of threatened despair or failure: this was not to be the way of the official conciliar discussion of the Trinity which followed on the moment when the Empire became officially Christian. Of course there were also serendipitous political events which contributed to that different emphasis. But in that official, public, discussion, which even so nearly split the stability of the Roman empire, you will find the presumption that we must *first* argue, speculatively, about the divine status of the Son in relation to the Father, and only subsequently muse about what to do with a wafting 'third', the Spirit. The result is, almost inevitably, a down-playing of the Spirit's ecstatic power and significance. And – one might suggest – that was precisely what a newly-official state church might prefer to the more messy existential alternative.

But this other way of thinking into the Trinity was by and large the way of the monks, who themselves departed to the desert partly in *riposte* to the making respectable of Christianity. For these monks saw in the demands of the long hours of prayer they set themselves the same agony of decision, in the Spirit, that Jesus had undergone in the wilderness; and they saw, in that same agony, the impossibility of human gain or progress *without* the same Spirit's aid. In short, they saw – as traces in the letters of Anthony show, and then strands in later contentious Christian/Platonist writers like Evagrius, and his teacher Origen from an earlier age of persecution – that prayer must be the crucible of the doctrine of

the Spirit, and to make a convincing case for the Trinity at all one must *start* with the Spirit, not leave the Spirit till third. One must start by giving an account of how the Spirit must have some sort of *distinct* role in relation to the ‘Father’ – that which stirs and sorts one’s desires and magnetically draws one back to the ‘Father’, so that one may be gradually transformed into the likeness of the Son – the same Son who sweated in the Spirit in the wilderness, and sweated in the Spirit again in the garden of Gethsemane. Only thus, this minority strand in the Christian tradition also implied, would one ultimately ascend ecstatically into the heavens to utter holy, holy holy; only thus would the way into the Trinity through prayer and testing and giving over to the Spirit, become the way into the Trinity through ecstasy and heavenly recognition. *From testing, to ecstasy.*

‘And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness’. This is admittedly the hard way into the doctrine of the Trinity. And there are some extremely good, logical reasons for ignoring it, and indeed for not believing in the doctrine of the Trinity at all, as I, in my undergraduate days rapidly - and arrogantly – concluded. There are also some good reasons, as we have now seen, why even the authorities of the church would sometimes prefer the doctrine to be more anodyne than it is. But our best teachers, like John Robinson, are the ones who give us the courage to question and re-think what we previously may have accepted merely on ecclesial authority or out of intellectual laziness. The standard patristic textbooks on the councils didn’t help me much with my conundrum then, I must say, and most of them still don’t now. For the doctrine of the Trinity was, even at its inception, never a merely *obvious* extension of what was found in the bible; nor the result of impeccable logical arguments; but rather it was something that came more subtly into shape out of the painful exigencies of prayer, worship and the struggles of Christian life, and to protect doctrinally what otherwise would have become incoherence. To follow Jesus into the wilderness, or to find oneself there even against one’s better judgement because one is driven by the Spirit, is

to confront the sharp question of how God begs to take shape in our lives. And when God asks us to *let God be God* in and through our own most deep and searching and painful decisions, there is the Spirit calling us again to the ‘Father’ and shaping us into the life of Sonship through the royal road of cross and resurrection.

‘How much can *you* tell me about the persons for whom your college is named?’ History, or rather oral tradition, does not tell us how Bishop Robinson answered the feisty young woman don at Lucy Cavendish. But just as he moved to Trinity in 1969, Robinson wrote something very apposite in a newspaper article: ‘I am seldom happy except on a frontier’, he wrote; ‘and I have a sense of constantly pushing out, or rather being pushed out – drawn from ahead, yet held from behind, by a power that will not let me go. The centre remains the same but the edges and the ends are opening and expanding. This gives one the courage to go on ... and to find doubt extending rather than bewildering’ [cited in Eric James, *Life of JATR*, p.188, from *The Christian Century*, 12 Nov 1969]. That, indeed, is the frame of mind in which one accepts the Spirit’s invitation to the wilderness, the frame of mind in which one asks to be incorporated into Jesus’s life and ongoing witness. That, in short, is the frame of mind in which the doctrine of the Trinity begins to make sense, albeit obscurely and often painfully. May this call into the glorious life of the Trinity animate your own lives, and the life of this college. May you know afresh the power of the Spirit and the demanding call of the redeemed life of the children of God. And may you finally come to worship the trinitarian God with all the ecstasy and abandonment of the prophets, martyrs and saints. *Amen.*