

Trinity College Cambridge
Trinity Sunday, 3 June 2012

Ezekiel 1: 4–10, 22–28a

Mark 1: 1–13

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May I speak—with some degree of clarity—in the name of the Father,
the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I come from the Emerald Isle, as you would quickly have noticed. Perhaps that's why I was asked to preach on Trinity Sunday. Following the example of St Patrick, I am supposed to expound the Trinitarian truth hidden in the shamrock: One God in the three 'Persons' of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I come from that part of the island that would qualify me also to join in celebrating the Diamond Jubilee, but, with that mere nod to a wonderful record of service and its worthy recognition this weekend, I must pass on.

The idea of the Trinity is fundamental to Christian faith, but it invariably defeats our attempts to express it satisfactorily. It is a 'riddlesome' concept, if you will pardon the invention of a word. Sometimes people try to make an asset out of the seeming liability. For if there is a Supreme Being behind all that is, we humans with our limited insight should not be surprised if we end up defying common-sense and logic in what we say on the subject. But that argument could be used to defend quite a few ideas about God that most of us would quickly dismiss as weird.

Finding the appropriate language is always a challenge. With the best will in the world, we can make the idea of the Trinity sound fantastic, even ridiculous. Christian failure at self-explanation no doubt partly accounts for the Koran's rejection of the idea of the Trinity:

God is only one God. He is far above having a son (Sura 4: 171).

In fact, Trinitarian Christians would heartily agree, and so would the New Testament writers. 'God having a son' falls at the first hurdle as a statement about either the Father or the Son. By contrast, and given the complexities and the pitfalls, the New Testament documents maintain an impressive level of discourse in their portrayal of the Trinity: reverence, yes, but also dignity, majesty, and even great beauty, as in the 'Farewell Discourse' in St John's Gospel.

It is, of course, to the councils and creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries that we owe the formalizing of the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet the basic idea is in the deep structure of the Gospels and epistles. It is not just in a few texts; it is 'warp and woof' in the New Testament. That came about because in the life and teachings of the man Jesus the first Christians encountered the divine in ways that challenged their inherited form of monotheism.

It's a long story after that, and theologians have proposed a variety of models and analogies in the effort to clarify: such as modalism, which thinks, but reductionistically, in terms of the modes by which God makes himself known; and the social Trinity, which attempts to give depth to such a statement as 'God is love', in consideration of the aeons when there were no creatures to be loved.

Analogies in the modern period are plentiful; somehow, to start mentioning them would risk lowering the tone. They fall seriously short. My own preferred comfort rag is that renaissance invention, the exploded diagram. According to one definition, 'Exploded views show objects blown apart to see how they fit together.' The point of the comparison is that the New Testament shows us God at work in the familiar dimensions of time and space, and in such a way that the individual 'Persons' of the Trinity are more clearly in view. That's the so-called 'economic Trinity': God in Trinity as conceived and experienced by us humans. The exploded diagram is also only an analogy, and there are obvious objections that could be raised against it. But it's not just the analogy that is stretched: in the incarnation Deity is stretched to the believable limit: the creator becomes involved in our creatureliness, the sovereign becomes servant, the judge becomes defendant.

Leaving aside analogy, we may ask ourselves whether it is possible to find a 'way in' to the Trinity by focusing on the so-called 'Persons'. Since the idea of God the Father as source of all is not so much the problem element (if one may so speak), attention tends to focus on God as Son and as Spirit when this question is addressed.

Already the Old Testament speaks about the divine Spirit, even if not in a Trinitarian way. And the New Testament attributes a crucial role to the Spirit in leading the Christian believer into that intimate relationship that Jesus himself enjoyed with the Father. 'I have made you known', says Jesus to the Father on the night of his betrayal, 'and I shall continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them' (John 17: 26). This comes through the agency of the Spirit (albeit the great prayer of John 17, reflecting on the intimacy of the Father and the Son, does not have explicit reference to the Spirit). 'Lose that, and you lose the gospel', wrote the late Colin Gunton, and with justification (*Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, 2000, p. 119).

However, when Christians set about explaining themselves to the outside world they can't do better than follow the example of the New Testament and focus on the second person of the Trinity. And once we get that 'piece' in place we have made a decisive move in the direction of affirming the Trinity.

Moreover, focusing on God incarnate helps ensure that faith is not just propositional, a matter of intellectual assent. It sharpens the question of whom, as well as what, one believes, and with what effect upon one's life. There's more to it than being able to say 'I believe'. James in the New Testament, pressing his point about Christian faith in action, says, 'You believe that there is one God! Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder' (James 2: 19). That kind of faith is what John Wesley called 'the faith of a devil', involving mental assent but having no power to shape and alter the life.

So the basic Christian confession cuts through the metaphysics to the simple assertion: 'Jesus is Lord.' That was not so inoffensive in the first century as it might sound—whether for the senior faith of Judaism, for which 'Lord' might convey more than a hint of the divine 'LORD' of Jewish faith, or the Roman imperial power, which had its own 'lords' jealous of their status and authority. Behind this simple assertion stands the recognition that much that was predicated of God in the Old Testament had already come to expression in the man Jesus.

Here I come back to the exploded diagram: for in the incarnation the divine ruler steps down from his throne. In the words of Psalm 18, part of which was sung earlier,

He parted the heavens and came down...

He mounted the cherubim and flew
He soared on the wings of the wind

He reached down from on high and took hold of me

This time it was not in theophanic power, as in the psalm, but in unprivileged sharing of our troubled humanity.

In this improbability, as it is by ordinary human reckoning, one finds a God who is actually credible. For in a world of endemic suffering and inequity the old questions about God are very hard to put to rest: Does he not care? Or is he just not able to help? But if in a fundamentally moral universe there is more involved than correcting technical faults in the system, and God himself enters transformingly into the scene, this God stands up as worthy of trust. 'The word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us' (John 1: 14), much read at Carol services, has vast implications; here indeed is a text that is not just for Christmas.

Thereafter the story itself takes wings, and we have the soaring vision of a God who not only rescues his people, but transforms them and makes them his messengers to the nations. The commissioning scene is described in Matthew 28, which has one of the most explicit Trinitarian references in the New Testament.

After his resurrection Jesus meets his disciples, by appointment, on a mountain in 'Galilee of the Gentiles'—away from the holy city of Jerusalem, the navel of the earth, as they had come to think of it.

They see him in the distance there on the mountain, and they (mostly) worship him. If one cannot help thinking of the magnificent Cristo Redentor ('Christ the Redeemer') statue towering over Rio de Janeiro, it is partly the text's fault.

Then he comes near to them, and, in literally all-encompassing language, he claims all authority in heaven and on earth, commissions his followers to teach all nations all that he has committed to them, and promises his presence with them throughout all time. And as some of them are still struggling with the idea that their master has come back from the dead, he drops into their credal basket the doctrine of the Trinity!: 'You will baptize them', he says, 'in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

Now he is saying that 'all of God', to coin a phrase, is underwriting the mission, and is at work in the world gathering erring humanity into the fellowship of the Triune God—who creates and saves and sustains 'till kingdom come'. Amen.