

SARUM COLLEGE 20th Anniversary
26th September 2015
The Triune God: re-shaping identity

THE TRINITY

I want to take a canter through theology to ecumenism and ministerial formation in order both to look back and to look forward from where the church is at present in this country, to develop an argument with regard to the centrality of our rootedness in God and the way in which this shapes ecumenism and formation.

There's an interesting argument that has been made over the last ten years or so with regard to the Trinity in the 17th century¹. The argument runs that during that century, the doctrine of the Trinity became detached from the worship of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity then, because of this detachment, became a point of argument and debate, rather than being seen as the God who draws people into worship and equips people for daily living. [this is a very short summary of a long argument]. It was no coincidence that at the same time the notion of knowledge and the self was being re-conceptualised, as seen in the writings of such philosophers as Rene Descartes and John Locke. The movement away from God to the self as the starting point for knowledge marked an individualising trend that has continued until the present.

The upshot of this was that the Trinity as a doctrine was, as it were, put on the back burner, in terms of serious intellectual discourse that connected with a lived reality of who God is and how God might be responded to. The argument then goes that it was not until the 20th century and the writings of such theologians as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner that the doctrine of Trinity began to be taken seriously again as central to the Christian faith.

Barth in his extensive *Church Dogmatics* argues for a re-capturing of a Trinitarian understanding as the starting point for theology. Interesting, recently, there has been a counter-argument that his strong focus on the Word has neglected the Spirit.² Rahner is known for his phrase 'the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity'³. He argues [again to summarise an extensive argument] that the inner life of God is the same as the outer life of God. He is seeking to bridge the gap that was created when the Trinity as a doctrine became an argument rather than a lived reality. It has been counter argued that this way of thinking does not sufficiently distinguish between the inner and the outer life of God and could lay the basis for an over-identification with God and the world.

In these islands, the issue about the Trinity re-surfaced with the 1989 British Council of Churches report on the Trinity.⁴

This British Council of Churches study guide, aptly named 'The Forgotten Trinity' illustrates both the concern about the decline in the doctrine of the Trinity, and the significance of its recovery. The Introduction begins with "There is a feeling abroad that the doctrine of the Trinity is an irrelevance. Once the centre of fierce debate, it now seems to belong to our religious past and to have little to say about the great issues of the day. It appears to be a mere abstraction, a playing with mathematical conundrums, of interest simply to those engaged in the higher reaches of theological speculation but of little moment for the worship of the church and the life of the world." The introduction then continues "it has become clear to us that on the question of the Trinity, centre numerous matters of great moment". The study guide goes on to unpack some of these e.g. worship, creation and salvation, and the nature of the human person.

¹ Paul Lim *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Modern England* OUP 2012; Jason E. Vickers *Invocation and Assent: The making and re-making of Trinitarian theology* Eerdmans 2008; Philip Dixon, *Nice and hot Disputes: The doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* T & T Clark 2003

² Rob MacDonald *Discerning the Spirit: Barth's Pneumatology* PhD 2011

³ Karl Rahner *The Trinity* New York: Herder and Herder 1970

⁴ *Forgotten Trinity, The: The BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today- Report, Study Guide and a Selection of Papers* 1989 republished 2011

Since then there has been a veritable resurgence of academic publications on the Trinity. One of the dilemmas about these many publications is that they illustrate something of the gap between the academic world and the life of the church. I believe that the church needs to catch up with this resurgence of interest, in terms of renewing an understanding of what it means for the Trinity to be central to the life of the church.

I want to point in particular to one writer, John Zizioulas, metropolitan of Pergamum in the Eastern Orthodox church, who has spent time teaching in British universities. While there are many different ways of interpreting the Trinity, I believe that what Zizioulas offers has a particular impact on both the church and the world. He writes from a perspective of a 'personal, relational ontology' of the Trinity.⁵ His writing is rooted in that time of the early centuries of church history when there were intensive debates on the Trinity and he is particularly influenced by the Cappadocian Fathers, specifically Basil.

He raises up the significance of seeing the Trinity in personal, relational terms. Out of this flows an argument of the importance of the person, the way in which the person is defined in relation and the concept of relationality being foundational. (an argument that I understand is increasingly being picked up in philosophical and sociological arenas at present).

It is at this point that I want to turn to ecumenism and then to formation.

ECUMENISM

It has been said for some time in this country that ecumenism is in crisis. In response to decline, denominations are turning to the affirmation and upbuilding of their own self-identity.

The issue of ecumenical sharing in training and formation has further illustrated the decline of ecumenism. It was noticeable that both the Church of England and the Methodist Church felt led to pursue in separation their renewal of theological education. Within a short space of time the Queens Foundation, which had involved Methodists, the Church of England and the URC, had had the URC General Assembly pull out [at the same time as pulling out of STETS], the Church of England decide to focus on Durham, all this while the Methodist church agreed to focus their ministerial formation on Queens.

I want to argue that if Trinitarian relationality had been more to the fore in each of our churches, we would at least have consulted together, if not have worked together, with regard to the nature of theological education.

If it is the Trinity which has brought us into life, which redeems us, which sustains us and which embodies relationality, we are then each drawn into the relation with the Trinity which leads us into a relatedness to each other. Seeking self-identity as denominations is an inadequate response to the God we each seek to serve. Living in relationship with God leads us to seeing God as the 'other' for each of our churches, the 'other' who in drawing us closer to God, inevitably draws us closer to one another.

My first point in regard to ecumenism is that ecumenism arises out of the triune God, who re-shapes our identity in conformity with the triune life. The ecumenical journey is shaped by our shared openness to the 'otherness' of God, which means re-focussing on such areas as worship and personal relationships.

My second point in regard to ecumenism is that ecumenism, arising out of the triune God, offers us a renewed understanding of witness and mission. If the triune God is about relational identity, then the church's witness, embodying this relational identity, flows into offering a new way of being and understanding for our world. [e.g. seeing the exclusivity of national boundaries as going against the universality of the kingdom; and the practice of not welcoming refugees as a sinful practice.]

⁵ John D Zizioulas *Being as Communion* St Vladimir's Seminary Press 1985; John D Zizioulas *Communion and Otherness* T & T Clark 2006; John Zizioulas *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics* T & T Clark 2008

I want to move this brief canter on to its third and final stage, that of formation.

FORMATION

If it is the triune God who re-shapes our identity in ways that are relational, then our response in terms of ministerial formation is to give priority to spirituality and worship, to personal and relational growth. Sarum College in its many courses on spirituality has given an excellent priority to this area.

There is a dilemma, which the Church of England Green report, in its focus on management and organisational skills for senior leadership, embodied. I am myself all in favour of good management and leadership, and believe that we have much to learn from secular organisations in this area. However, the priority for the church is about modelling in formation what we believe about God.

Formation in response to the triune God is about

- Cultivating the personal life in response to God – both inwardly and in enabling others to be who they are meant to be as persons
- Cultivating spirituality – knowing the triune God, in scripture, prayer, tradition and the world
- Cultivating relationships – both within and outside the church.

I was struck by reading through Bruce Duncan's lecture about the start of Sarum college with the reference to risk. When I reflect on the church's understanding of God, the role of the Holy Spirit has sometimes been neglected. I have been interested to ponder whether the raising up of charismatic and Pentecostal traditions is the Spirit reminding us of the Spirit's presence. Zizioulas argues that the church in the west has adopted a strong Christological focus which has led to the growth of the church as an institution. This, he continues, needs to be balanced by the Pneumatological focus of the east, seeing the church as the Spirit-filled, Spirit-led body.

The Spirit leads us, not just from the past, but from the future, into God's future. Re-balancing in terms of the Spirit is about opening our lives to the risk of not knowing. But so doing opens our lives to the possibility of new directions.

I give thanks for the 20 years of Sarum's life and prayer for the new possibilities that God is yet opening up for this College.

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