

‘On Naming God: *Relationship, Equality, Participation, and Difference*’

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One of the best theologians of the twentieth century, the African-American essayist, novelist and playwright James Baldwin said in a 1961 essay these words:

‘To be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward, makes me better. I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control others. Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up...whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other...there is no way around this...these artificial walls – which have been up so long to protect us from something we fear, must come down.’¹

Baldwin naming God as some enormous, overwhelming desire, joy, and power...which in the going towards we do not understand but which makes us better – is I think a deep and profound theological observation. The first thing any theologian must accept is that we cannot control the object of our life’s work – God does not exist to be studied, God exists to be known and worshipped and adored in the often arduous work of prayer. And Baldwin is right again I think, when infers that the outcome of that intimacy with God is not the improvement of one’s own life alone, but that that intimacy leads to an understanding of God as the source and origin of our life who is committed to liberation, summoning us to a love which demands our growing up, such that we move beyond individualism to community, beyond fear to trust, to love not just the world around us, but even the world within us.

Now of course, the theologians task is one primarily of exegesis, attending carefully to the text which tells us the story of our salvation – of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit moving among us. Too many theologians today seem to forget this crucial part of our work! I left seminary ten years ago now, and the copy of the Greek New Testament which was handed down to me still had in it that wonderful quote from Johann Albrecht Bengel², which was really an admonition:

‘Te totum applica ad textum; rem totum applica ad te.’

Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the whole text to yourself.

That admonition heeded, I want to say that exegesis I believe does not end with scripture, though it must begin there. The voice of God in scripture is also discerned through the voices of other people, in other people’s life experience, in the crucible of our own lives, and in our attentiveness to the “viva vox Dei” speaking to us *in* those experiences. It is because we are Trinitarian people that those of us who are Christians cannot for one moment live as though God has stopped speaking, as though all God might do in the world ended with the twenty-second chapter of the book of Revelation – the voice of the Spirit, speaks even right now to our hearts and minds and souls. The Word of God is not a text, but a living breathing person, the second person of the

¹ James Baldwin, *In Search of a Majority: An Address*, 1961.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Albrecht_Bengel

Trinity, Jesus Christ. It is of course, the Spirit who makes it possible for us to *be* with God as Baldwin says, to be really involved with that enormous, overwhelming desire, joy and power - before we can even *name* God.

Now the doctrine of the Trinity, is actually a doctrine borne of real human experience. To name God, is to name a particular yet universal reality that transfigures the way in which every other component of reality is understood, including ourselves and others. Naming God has been important to humankind from the very beginning. In the Hebrew scriptures of course, there are simply too many names for God for me to mention. Time and again it is God who in fact names us - whilst at others it is us who name God: we are named by God in Genesis 1:26, in Genesis 15 God identifies himself to Abram as his shield³ a little later in the same chapter God identifies himself saying “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess”⁴. In Genesis 17, Abram is renamed Abraham by God⁵. Yet in Genesis 16:13 Hagar names God as “the One who sees me”, whilst in Exodus 3:4 it is God in the burning bush who names “Moses, Moses!”. Christian theology teaches that even here, it is God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit both naming and being named. As Irenaeus of Lyon in his work *On the Apostolic Preaching* says so beautifully, the voice in the burning bush is the voice of Christ, and the rock from which water flows in the wilderness is again, Christ who is leading us all through the power of the Spirit to the Father’s Kingdom.⁶ To name God is therefore to say something about the kind of time we, as Christians, inhabit. We mark in the Church’s calendar days such as Easter Day, Pentecost, Ascension Day – serve not as commemoration but an entering into – a sanctification of time beyond place and space. Time past, present and future are blended into one as the liturgy shows us a sacramental prefiguring of a transformed and liberated world.⁷

As the Church has just celebrated Easter – which brings to the fore the relationship of Father and Son, so it focussed once again on the Ascension in which Son and Spirit take centre stage, most recently we celebrated the feast of Pentecost – recalling the relationship between the Spirit and all flesh.⁸ But these dividing lines are of course, false and unhelpful. The Trinity cannot be managed or contained. As Irenaeus again said ‘without the Spirit it is not possible to see the Word of God, and without the Son one is not able to approach the Father; for the knowledge of the Father is the Son, and knowledge of the Son of God is through the Holy Spirit’⁹ Here is the excess of love with which we can all be involved which in the going toward, makes us better - or as Mother Julian of Norwich articulated:

Anyone ‘who in this life willingly chooses God out of love may be sure of being loved without end, and this endless love works grace in them’.¹⁰

It’s important to know then, that the question for the theologian has never been what is God or how does God “work” – the question that possess our minds and is our life’s work is this:

‘*who* is God?’ Theologians may, especially in my field, enjoy the sexy language of ‘hypostasis’, ‘ousia’, ‘energeia’, and ‘prosopon’ as we seek to make sense of the Trinity, but there is a real life that we long to touch, a life that reaches out to us, a life we long to know...

³ Genesis 15:1

⁴ Genesis 15:7

⁵ Genesis 17:5

⁶ Irenaeus of Lyon, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 46.

⁷ Cf. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/8-july/features/features/petertide-ordinations-without-a-city-wall>

⁸ Cf. Joel 2:28.

⁹ Irenaeus, *ibid*, 7.

¹⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

This is our passion, our torment and our delight¹¹ of which Gregory of Nyssa spoke so clearly: '[one] who looks precisely into the depths of the mystery [of God] grasps in secret in [their] own soul some measure of understanding'¹² God is, as another Gregory put it: the highest light, 'unapproachable and ineffable, neither grasped by the mind nor expressed in language...to the extent that we are purified it appears, to the extent that it appears it is loved, to the extent that it is loved it is again known.'¹³ ...'neither uneven in essences or natures, nor increased or decreased by superiorities or inferiorities; from every perspective equal, from every perspective the same, as the beauty and greatness of heaven is one; an infinite coalescence of three infinities; each God when considered in himself; as Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Spirit; each preserving his properties. The three are God when known together...when I first know the one I am also illumined from all sides by the three; when I first distinguish the three I am also carried back to the one. When I picture one of the three I consider this the whole...when I bring the three together in contemplation, I see one flame and am unable to divide or measure the united light.'¹⁴

Love then, transfigures our vision – in our love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit we see the beautiful unity that exists in diversity. Knowledge of God and the exercise of love are inseparable.

I. *Relationship, Equality, Participation and Difference*

You would be quite right to charge me with an oversimplification of things if I was to suggest, as I am about to, that once God has been named as Trinity – questions of Relationship, Equality, Participation and Difference are essentially settled for the Christian community. All Christian claims about the Godhead have anthropological consequences.¹⁵

God is an indivisible three - continuous, complete, equal and unified. The theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar in his work *Heart of the World* remarks that:

'Love is found only in distance, unity only in difference. God himself is unity of Spirit only in the distinction of Father and Son.'

It would of course be entirely understandable if someone for whom these claims mean nothing was sat here thinking, "Okay, so you think this thing called the Trinity exists...so what, what difference does it make?"

Well, as the descendant of enslaved African people, I am all too aware of what happens when belief and practice get compartmentalised into siloes of indifference. It is easy to recognise that many university sermons were preached in favour of abolition, but a harder thing to recognise that the beautiful language of the Book of Common Prayer was recited here, often daily – by people who did not believe my ancestors were human beings. The Book of Common Prayer with its language of "manifold sins and wickedness" and that profound "Athanasian Creed" which speaks so profoundly of the Holy Trinity yet closes reminding us that 'all men shall rise again with their bodies: and *shall* give account for their own works" yes, at the same time those words were said,

¹¹ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse 2.3*.

¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 40.4*.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 40.41*.

¹⁵ For a critique of this, or a similar kind of projection onto the Trinitarian life, see: Karen Kilby, *Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity*, New Blackfriars, 81 (956), 432-445.

too many Bishops, Priests, Deacons, lay faithful belonging to this Church – saw no dissonance between capturing, branding, shipping, torturing and selling people just like me.

In three days' time I will fly to Jamaica, the other country of which I am a citizen (one of the realms and territories I opened this sermon by praying for) – a country where, again, people just like me can be jailed for ten years and given forced labour under the anti-sodomy laws still in place - a version of a 1533 act taken to that beautiful island in the 17th and 18th century by the British. This is not a summons to guilt, it is a warning, to all of us including myself – that we must live what we proclaim in the creeds. All Trinitarian heresies, are rooted in the misplaced desire to put one person of the Trinity over another – likewise the very worst moments in Christian history derive from the desire to subordinate one human being to another.

In the great words of St Ephrem the Syrian:

‘It [is] right that we should accept in simplicity those Three Persons, receiving them with love, and not with questions. Their nature should Not have to chase after us and become like unto us—for they are like only themselves in all respects.’¹⁶

God is wholly other – yet one with us...our neighbour is whole other, yet one of us...

Trinitarian-worshipping people then:

Have to see the ikon and homoiosis, the image and likeness of God in *all* people without reserve. We proclaim the truth of the Trinity only to the extent that we live and love as though that reality mattered in our relationship one to another.

The treatment we see of refugees and asylum seekers.
The way many in society talk about the poor.
The violence and hatred shown towards trans children of God.
The war against Ukraine.
The lack of justice for victims and survivors of sexual abuse in the Church and wider world.
Our basic indifference to human suffering.

All these social evils, are a denial of the Trinitarian reality, which is at the heart of the Church's worship. For that reality teaches us that we too, are of one substance – called to live without division, without separation, equal, united, beautiful in our difference and diversity. We should love without questions. For God made the world leaving *nothing* barren of his divinity.¹⁷

As Gregory of Nyssa so beautifully put it, God:

‘by his own inbreathing implanted life in what he formed, so that the earthly might be raised up to the divine and one certain grace of equal honour might pervade all of creation.’¹⁸

There is, friends, this Godlike beauty in humankind, and a likeness to the transcendent trinitarian dignity which we ignore at our collective peril. For God, Father Son and Holy Spirit is known and

¹⁶ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymn* no. 40.

¹⁷ Cf. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 45.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourses*, 6.5.

worshipped, honoured and adored – only in the act of loving. Listen now, as I close to the greatest maxim that exists for theologians and for all who bear the name ‘Christian’:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.”