

## Trinity Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2016

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

Just over forty years ago now, a great controversy raged across the media for a while. It didn't involve some political or sporting scandal; it involved surprisingly enough a work of art – Jackson Pollock's "Blue Poles". The National Gallery of Australia, with the support of a then fairly new Federal Government had paid what seemed like an enormous sum of money - \$2 million – for the painting. There were headlines in the papers for a while – one screamed "A Drunk Did It" – and it was known that Jackson Pollock did have a problem with alcohol and other substances. Others worked themselves into a lather about the waste of money. The gallery quietly exhibited the picture. It is now one of their greatest treasures – now worth many, many times what they paid for it. Later this year, it's being loaned to the Royal Academy of Arts in London for a special exhibition of Pollock's works. The interesting thing about Blue Poles is that the Gallery doesn't seek to explain it. You need to experience it. And when you do see it, it's an enormous painting. If you get too close to it, it doesn't seem to mean anything much, but if you step back and take the time to look at it for a while, a pattern begins to emerge. I've seen it more than once now, and the experience is the same – not exactly the same – there's always a subtle difference in what I see.

The idea of the Trinity is a bit like that. It emerged in great controversy. The then emperor, Constantine, a recent convert to Christianity saw that the church was divided as to how God could be described as three persons in one – as Father, Son and Spirit. And Constantine didn't want a divided church, but recognised events were starting to run away from him. He called a Council at Nicea in 325 and a creed was accepted – shorter than the Nicene Creed which was adopted at a later Council and which we will recite shortly. At the Council of Nicea, the bishops went on to do other things – regulate the time of preparation for baptism, regulate the morals of the clergy, work out what to do with penitents in one church trying to get pardoned in another, laying down that a new bishop should be consecrated by all the bishops in that province – or at least three of them (that still happens today) and so on. After all this, the bishops went home – where away from the emperor and the other bishops, some began to have second thoughts and do their own thing. It wasn't for about another 50 years that things were tidied up. Now I'm not going to go into all the details, but it's a fascinating read, particularly if you thought that the early church was all sweetness and light. The controversy raged – there was a great cast of characters – Arius, Athanasius, (whose creed is in the back of the Prayer Book) Sabellius, Hippolytus, Callistus (of whom Hippolytus said he was "a senseless and unstable fellow who improvises blasphemies in every direction." ). There were ex-communications, bishops sentenced to the treadmill or sent to the mines in Sardinia – just to give you an idea of what went on. In the end, Gregory of Nazianzus, who along with Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa tidied the whole thing up said "My inclination is to avoid all assemblies of bishops, because I have never seen any council come to a good end, nor turn out to be a solution of evils. On the contrary, it usually increases them."

The early church tried to define Trinity – with words like persona rather than person, and substance and so on. Maybe they tried to get too close. I don't think you can define Trinity – any more than Einstein's  $E=mc^2$  and his Theory of Relativity defines or fully explains the majesty and glory

of the universe that we can experience when we look at a clear night sky and with the psalmist consider the works of the heavens, the works of God's fingers, the moon and the stars which have been set in order.<sup>1</sup> Or have you ever attempted to come up with an exhaustive explanation of the experience of falling in love. You can't do it, can you? You can say things about it that are true, but you can never explain it in such a way that a person who hadn't experienced it would completely understand what you were talking about. In the end it is still a mystery. In fact to push that analogy a bit further, imagine trying to write down a set of instructions for falling in love; an explanation or equation for someone who didn't previously know the experience, so that if they followed your formula they would actually fall in love. Could you do it??? I doubt it.

And yet the fact that you can't explain the experience or write a manual for it doesn't stop you from falling in love, or mean that the experience is any less real. The experience comes whether you can comprehend it or not. It can come even if you don't believe in it. Now I think the same is true of the Trinity. Before there was ever a doctrine of the Trinity, there was an experience of the Trinity. The early church experienced God in certain ways, and as they attempted to describe their experience the idea of the Trinity emerged. They began with their experience of the living God. The theology came second. Christian faith is not about explanations, it is about experience. It is about a relationship with the living God.

Yet we often feel under constant pressure to define things, to be certain about things. The English theologian and biblical scholar, Paula Gooder who has spoken to the Clergy Summer School at Southport a couple of times now I think has written; *"We live in a world obsessed by certainty. We are meant to hold clear, confident view on subjects that range widely from education to euthanasia, from economics to the environment – and to express our clear, certain views regularly....premature certainty is as corrosive of truth as lies can be. Certain things in life need time for reflection as we wrestle with issues, questions and explore possibilities. Rushing too swiftly to immovable certainty undermines our ability to grasp the truth. Today we often feel that we can only worship if we are clear in our views, if we have dotted all the "i"s and crossed all the "t"s. Doubt can be seen to be the antithesis of worship. It is not. We worship not out of our certainty but out of our response to God. Fortunately we do not have to comprehend everything about God and God's relationship with the world before we worship. In fact, sometimes it is our doubts that can draw us deeper into the mystery of God, and from deep within the mystery of God the only possible thing to do is worship."*

In a much deeper way than one can be drawn into "Blue Poles", the idea of Trinity, which we can't reduce to some formula, draws us deeper into the mystery of God. One of the things that most of the theologians agree on when considering the Trinitarian nature of God is that we are not so much talking about three individuals, but about three relationships. Three relationships of love that exist within the being of God.

Listen to some of the lines from today's readings. In Proverbs, we heard the Holy Spirit, portrayed as Lady Wisdom, singing, "When the Creator marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 8:4

inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”<sup>2</sup> In Paul’s letter to the Romans we heard that “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and ... God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”<sup>3</sup> And in the gospel according to John we heard “When the Spirit of truth comes, ... she will not speak on her own, but will speak whatever she hears. ... She will glorify me, because she will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine.”<sup>4</sup>

What we have here are relationships of love that are extravagantly self-giving. Rather than becoming rivals of one another, they delight in one another and strive to glorify one another. There seems no limit to their willingness to give themselves to one another, and to give themselves to the strengthening of the other relationships. One writer calls it a love triangle of the trinity a love triangle that really works – not in any way like poisonous relationships we can find in human love triangles which often destroy rather than strengthen relationships. Others use an image of an unbroken circle of love.

The more we step back and contemplate and reflect on the triangle of love that is Trinity, rather than trying to define it, the more we see God’s emerging call to us to be like God and to love in ways which are not possessive and aggressive; to love in ways that do not seek the exclusion of the other or the glorification of ourselves. The more fully we imitate the self-giving love of the Trinity, the more we will be set free from possessiveness and self-gratification.

The beautiful and extravagantly self-giving triangle of love of the Trinity is not only a model for us to imitate – and the triangle is not the model – there are others. It is also an invitation. Because just as these three relationships cannot only tolerate other relationships but celebrate them and glory in them, so too they eagerly look to draw others, namely us, into the life of those relationships. God is not a closed system, an exclusive love bond that has nothing to offer to those outside. On the contrary, God is intensely and overflowing relational, and longs to draw us into relationship. The heart of the revelation of the nature of God is Christ’s self-offering on the cross, where Jesus, having been falsely cast as a rival, gives up his life rather than reciprocate the hostility, and thus reveals to us the nature of God’s self-giving love and the invitation into that love. And that’s where we stand at this table today, as witnesses of that act of self-giving, as recipients of that extravagant offer, as the Trinity of Love reaches out to us and places the body of Christ into our hands. And so here again, we are faced with the call and the invitation. How shall we respond? We can denounce Christ as some kind of rival and grasp at all we desire seeking to possess and control, and gratify ourselves, or we can let go, and accept the invitation and be carried by the Spirit into a relationship of self giving love – God’s love which has already been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Trinity invites us to unlock our hearts.

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<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 8: 29-30

<sup>3</sup> Romans 5:5

<sup>4</sup> John 16: 13-15