

What's in the Name

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 4 June 2023

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Trinity Sunday A

Psalm 8; Matthew 28: 16-20

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

The clergy of the Uniting Church of Australia are obliged to agree that they will baptise new members in '*the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*'. It is one of really only a handful of non-negotiables. So, why? What does this mean? And what matters about this particular attempt at describing God?

At first glance the formula may seem self-evident. After all, as we just heard, the risen Christ was recorded by Matthew in what is sometimes called the Great Commission, directing their followers to go into all the world and preach the Good News, baptising in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. So, on a literal reading we have a commandment of Christ and even if we take a more liberal reading that sees here merely the command of the early church, we have a very long-standing teaching that we need to take seriously. As a Christian community we are, predominantly, even here at Pitt Street, baptised into an ancient Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God. This is the name (singular, not names plural notice) that we have for God. This is the name that we reflect upon today on so-called Trinity Sunday.

Now some folk – including some of us gathered here – reject the Trinity out of hand. And it's quite easy to do so. It can be seen as merely a concoction of the early church leaders, predominantly male, that after several centuries of debate still makes most people's head hurt. As the old joke goes, disrespectfully quoting the Athanasian creed, '*the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the holy Ghost incomprehensible*' – all ...incomprehensible to most of us. That is of course to misunderstand and distort incomprehensibility, which is a marvellous word for the infinite nature of the Divine beyond our human capacity to understand. Yet difficulties remain.

The Trinity can be seen as patriarchal, at least in its traditional vocabulary, leaving insufficient and frequently subordinated space for the feminine within the Godhead. It can be seen as overly personal, familial, and suggestive of a closed circle that leaves us out. It can be seen as very much a product of its time, and as reducing God to some very limited concepts well outstripped by recent advances in science and cosmology. So, beyond familiarity and a possibly misplaced loyalty to family and tradition, why do we continue to use this formula at the key entry point of new adherents into our faith communities? What does the Trinity have to say for itself and how can it help us grow in deeper communion with the infinite God to which this formulation points?

It is, of course, impossible to speak of God. As Richard Rohr expresses it:

“Circling around” is all we can do. Our speaking of God is a search for similes, analogies, and metaphors. All theological language is an approximation, offered tentatively in holy awe. That’s the best human language can achieve. We can say, “It’s like—it’s similar to...,” but we can never say, “It is...” because we are in the realm of beyond, of transcendence, of mystery. And we must—absolutely must—maintain a fundamental humility before the Great Mystery. If we do not, religion always worships itself and its formulations and never God.”

(Richard Rohr, [The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation](#))

However this does not excuse us from the task of ‘*circling around*’ – of trying to put into words our current understanding.

Indeed, in recent decades more and more theologians have returned to the topic of the Trinity, seeking fresh evolved expressions of its ancient truths. Much of the energy of this in the latter part of the twentieth century came from liberation and feminist theologians, seeking models for human interaction that are collaborative and democratic rather than hierarchical and tyrannical. And in more recent times queer theologians have continued that trend, even as more conservative theologians have sought to bolster patriarchal family arrangements by recourse to subordinationist and ‘complementarian’ readings of the doctrine.

So where should we begin?

Paul Smith from the Integral Christian network has proposed that we conceive of the Trinity as the integration of the three voices of God-talk; third person, second person and first person. This coheres in many ways with the ancient understanding of the word person, *persona* literally translated as ‘sounding through’ and used to describe a mask in the Greek theatre – these are God’s three ‘masks’, the one God adopting three voices or modes.

On this model we can identify the third person God – the God-Beyond, the cosmic face beyond the limit of language. Then there is the second person God – the God Beside us, the personal, theistic God who comes to us in a myriad of forms, from Jesus, to our next-door neighbour. And finally, the first person God, the God-Being-Us – the mystical inner face of God within, variously named as the True Self, the Buddha nature, the Christ Consciousness.

This evolved understanding draws upon the traditional configuration but takes us beyond the patriarchal language and gives humanity a place within the Godhead. It answers some of the being questions, but not the question of how this Trinitarian name affects our living and acting in this world for good.

So, to go further we could begin from the admittedly arguable assumption that God is love, and always for us – on our side. Now this is an assumption that can only be tested in practice and above all in the practice of prayer. But it is a touchstone against which our articulation of the nature of God can be tested. As Catherine LaCugna argued, any idea of God as not giving, not outpouring, not self-surrendering, not totally loving is a theological impossibility and absurdity. *God only and always loves*. Think of a waterwheel or better – thank you Cynthia Bourgeault for this image – think of a paddle steamer. Divine compassion and love propel the God vessel forward in one constant direction towards greater life, from atoms to universes.

This overflowing, outpouring of divine love never stops or goes backwards. It is dynamic, not static. It is always about action, not just within God but within us, for we too are God's self-expression, words of God. We can feel this movement in ourselves as we are drawn by the life and example of Jesus towards the Creator, who then breathes us out as Spirit that the Christ may once again be known in the world, in a dynamic and continuous process. The water flows from one paddle to the next propelling the boat of Christian community and lived faith forward.

For the Trinity is never about God as three objects viewed from afar – or even three 'people'. The Trinity is about being caught up in the dynamic movement of God that brings life in the world. As Sarah Bachelard expresses it:

"to be drawn into the Trinitarian life means constantly giving yourself over to and receiving yourself from God, as Jesus did. And that means that who we are is never closed, never fixed; we're always being given over and given back, always renewed, always deepening our receptivity, and so endlessly growing in love."

So, to baptise someone in that Trinitarian name is to baptise them into that ongoing process – a process that is about love, about life and from our perspective about how we are to live our lives in such a way as to be most godlike.

Human society generally prefers dualism and hierarchy. The irreverent characterisation of the Trinity as Big Daddy, Junior and the Spook points to this tendency. This is a heresy to be resisted at all costs, as the debates of the early church illustrate. Similarly, the tendency inbuilt in Platonist dualistic versions of the world to prefer one partner to another, male to female, spirit to flesh, heaven to hell is overcome by the equality of relationships within the Trinity. As Richard Rohr puts it: ¹

'the doctrine of the Trinity defeats the dualistic mind and invites us to non-dual, holistic consciousness. It replaces the argumentative principle of two with the dynamic principle of three. It brings us into the wonderfully open space of 'not one, but not two either'.

This is wonderfully liberating and means that when we are baptised and invite others to be baptised in and into this three-fold name, we are inviting them not to an assertion of unchangeable beliefs, but into an ever-changing and evolving set of relationships.

The Cappadocian scholars described God as a circular rotation - a *perichoresis* or dance – 'of total outpouring and perfect receiving among three equal partners' (Rohr). As Marcella Althaus Reid observed, the polyamorous possibilities of this ever-shifting dance are infinite and probably quite unsettling to those of us brought up with a more hierarchical or at least static understanding of the relationships within the Godhead. 'It takes two to tango, but three to be a divinity. Or that two may dance with pleasure but only three can make it divine.' With characteristic daring Althaus Reid goes on to speculate, that 'different ways of combining ones to make three have different theological and amorous connotations and therefore different faithful results.'

Is the Trinity then 'a case of restricted polyfidelity'? Many other friends and lovers may be hidden in the closets of each person of the Trinity. To presume otherwise would force us to fall into gender (and sexual) divine stability.'

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*

Now some of that may be a bridge too far for some of us, but the kind of re-imagining that Althaus Reid is inviting here, I hope helps all of us to take the Trinity out of the closet, dust it off and realise that the name we have here – that name in which Christians have been baptised for countless generations – is no mere formula. It is full of power and possibility to effect transformation not just in the lives of the individuals so baptised, but in cosmos of which they are a part. We know that when a butterfly flaps their wings, there is a sandstorm in the Sahara – when someone is baptised in the name of the Trinity, it reverberates through the galaxies.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Beyond, Beside and Being Us. Amen