

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

TRINITY SUNDAY

SUNDAY 18 MAY 2008

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Psalm 8; Matthew 28: 16-20

"The Folly of Defining the Indefinable"

The first time as a child that I heard of God as 'three in one', I thought of the ice cream called a Neapolitan slice! Such are the problems with trying to define the indefinable. Right around the world today in the church calendar is 'Trinity Sunday'. It is also the day when some preachers wish they were on leave. That is because the so-called 'doctrine of the trinity' is hard to understand, hard to explain and for many is an encumbrance. So, what do we make of it?

I

First point is that **all words have a history**. Terms, expressions and phrases don't come out of nowhere. Let me illustrate. I expect that when my wife and I are in England later this year, there will be at least one occasion when we sing (or listen while others sing)

*God save our gracious Queen,
long live our noble Queen,
God save the Queen!
Send her victorious,
happy and glorious,
long to reign over us;
God save the Queen!*

We're not likely to hear all six verses. The words become more nationalistic and bellicose as they progress; verse 6 says,

*Lord, grant that Marshal Wade
may by thy mighty aid
victory bring.
May he sedition hush,
and like a torrent rush,
rebellious Scots to crush.
God save the Queen!*

Now, can you guess its history? As I said, all words have a history, and these are no exception. "God save the Queen" was first sung in 1745 during the Jacobite invasion of England. In an attempt to restore the Scottish house of Stuart to the throne, an army under Bonnie Prince Charlie invaded England in 1745. It was a serious threat to the rule of George II; hence the sentiments, including the anti-Scottish words. Marshal Wade was a high ranking officer leading the English troops. "God save the King" (as it was then) was an English patriotic song. The Scots were wiped out in the historic Battle of Culloden.

When my wife and I are in Wales later this year we may well hear the stirring "Men of Harlech". These words also have a history, in the fight for Welsh independence. This song is positively

bloodthirsty! After a reference to the Saxons' courage breaking come some of the most aggressive words you're likely to hear. Sung in Welsh, the more so!

*See they now are flying!
Dead are heap'd with dying!
Over might hath triumph'd right,
our land to foes denying;
upon their soil we never sought them,
love of conquest hither brought them,
but this lesson we have taught them:
'Cambria ne'er can yield!'*

"Men of Harlech" is a Welsh patriotic song. Well, at least the Welsh do not keep invoking God as being on their side against allcomers! But when you hear or sing either "God save the Queen" or "Gwyr Harlech" (Men of Harlech) it's worth knowing their origins. Both have a story behind them. Question is: Do you want to make that *your* story? Not I.

II

Second point. **As these words have a history, so it is with the three-fold name for God:** 'father, son and holy spirit'. Not part of the original gospel of Matthew, those words were added later. Where do they come from?

A few miles north of Rome the ancient Via Flaminia (Flaminian Way) crosses the Tiber at the Pons Mulvius (Milvian Bridge). Built of stone in 109 BCE, the original bridge is incorporated into the present structure. Along with the site of Golgotha, I find Milvian Bridge the most significant landmark in Christianity. It was there, on 28th October 312, that the claimant to supreme rule of the Roman Empire fought his rival Maxentius. The man was Constantine.

He was a convert to Christianity, and on ascent to the throne he set in place huge changes for Christians and for their religion. First he declared that Christianity was no longer illegal. Then he made it the official religion of empire. Finally he put an end to tolerance of other religions. He also decreed that December 25th should be Jesus' birthday.

Constantine believed that church and state must work hand in hand, and that in religious disputes *he* should be the final arbiter. As he wanted order in empire, so with the church. The big test came with mounting debate over the way Jesus the Christ was to be described. Human, yet more than human, he was coming to be considered somehow 'divine'. How to say this? In 325 Constantine called a council of bishops to his summer home at Nicaea (today Iznik in Turkey, about 100 km south-east of Istanbul) to settle the issue. The majority decided that Jesus was *co-eternal* with God and of the *same substance* as God. They issued the statement intended to settle any further dispute. This was the so-called 'Nicene Creed'. Those who disagreed were branded heretics and sent packing.

The essence of the Nicene Creed was this 'doctrine of the trinity', which says that God is three persons in one – father, son and spirit. It comes directly out of a 4th century attempt to get everyone believing (or at least claiming to believe) the same thing. We have inherited the Nicene Creed in somewhat the way we have inherited "God save the Queen" and "Men of Harlech". The Nicene Creed was an attempt at marshalling the troops under one banner, and giving Christian mission a good kick along. For many Christians, accepting its core ideas has become a test of whether they're sound in the faith or heretics.

III

Third point: this **idea of ‘persons’**. This creed or any other statement of faith that tries to define the indefinable comes unstuck when we forget its history and insist on treating it all quite literally. We need to be reminded that all godtalk is humanly constructed and metaphorical. To claim more than that for any of our godtalk is to become idolatrous.

The big stumbling block for many is this word ‘person’. It’s from a Latin word for the mask worn by an actor. ‘*Per sona*’ means that through which the sound (or voice) comes. The church fathers wanted to say they believed they had heard the voice of God in three ways. These were the wonders of creation, the *icon* or ‘image’ of God (as Paul called Jesus) and the mysterious guiding and enabling presence moving earth toward its ultimate fulfilment. As an account of their ‘God-experience’ this was fine. It went wrong when seen as a literal description of the inner workings of the divine. It becomes absurd when some theologians talk about God as a community of three persons dancing around. Let me try to illustrate the dilemma.

In 1949 one of the finest movies of all time was released. It starred the young Alec Guinness (35), who with Olivier, Gielgud and Richardson would become one of the greats. I refer to the film “Kind Hearts and Coronets”, in which Alec Guinness played eight different parts – or *personas*. It was English black comedy at its best. Remember the story line? A poor relative of the Duke of D’Ascoyne plots to inherit the title by murdering eight other heirs who stand ahead of him in succession. Guinness played the duke, the banker, the parson and the general; the admiral, young D’Ascoyne, young Henry and Lady Agatha.

Critics said eight different actors could not have done better than Guinness, whose genius ensured him thereafter role after role after role. But none of the eight *personas* in which he appeared was the real, essential Alec Guinness, of course. Nor would putting them all together in some sort of community have given us the real, essential Alec Guinness. The real essential Alec Guinness was, and always would be, inaccessible. There is a further question about these eight *personas*.

Given that he played all eight so convincingly, could it be said that they were somehow *in* Guinness from the start; ‘eternal’? I doubt we would want to say that. But those who want to make the Nicene Creed the standard for all godtalk are saying this about the three *personas* of the trinity. They’ve all been there from time beyond time. God always has been ‘father, son and spirit’ – and this is the standard for orthodox faith.

What I have said is that all words have a history. They come out of a particular context – which may not be our context, and which may render those words rather strange to us. The doctrine of the trinity has a history – and has been elevated to become for many **the last word** on the indescribable God. I am not opposed to our saying it, just so long as we don’t use it in heresy hunts. We do that with ‘God save the Queen’ and ‘Men of Harlech’ – not using them as battle songs about vanquishing Bonnie Prince Charlie in one case or the Saxon hordes in the other.

The doctrine of the trinity, like all godtalk, is an attempt to put in words what is beyond words; an attempt to define the indefinable, so that we can say “Now we know just what God is like!” We don’t, of course. God will be forever beyond understanding, beyond words, beyond definition. Even our most finely tuned and sublime language cannot capture this mysterious reality we call ‘God’.

Bishop Spong says what we *can* talk about is our ‘God experience’. By this we mean those moments of awe and wonder, of uplift and inspiration, of guiding and goading – and those ‘Ah ha!’

experiences too – from which we infer that something mysterious and wonderful lies behind them. When we use words, terms, expressions to speak of the Holy, we need to be humble in doing so. These are but feeble attempts at describing the indescribable.

We forget at our peril the significance of the burning bush, that symbol loved by Christians of the Reformed tradition (especially ex-Presbyterians!). In his definitive God experience Moses crept closer to the burning bush until told “No further!” When he asked the name of the One speaking to him, the answer was “Ehyeh asher ehyeh”, which means “I will be who I will be.” That is God’s answer to those who try to tie God down.