

LIVING THE TRINITY

Sung Eucharist

Trinity Sunday

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, May 31st 2015

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Alan Bennett's first West End play was published not far short of fifty years ago now. Some of you may remember it – it was titled simply *Forty Years On* and it was based in an English public school. One of the most famous clips from it was of the hapless young Foster in his Confirmation Class with the Chaplain. The most amusing piece was when the said clergyman got on to facts of life. In a rather laboured way he begins something like: 'Well, Foster, moving on from creation we come to your *body*. Starting with your head and all its thinking, then down to your arms and so on – all that's pretty straightforward. Then eventually we arrive at your private parts – now here God made a pretty bosh shot of things!

Now I shan't delay further with this. Indeed, so controversial was it that the entire episode was cut out in some performances! However, it had been preceded by more stuff on Christian belief and doctrine – creation, atonement, the Holy Spirit. Just before the facts of life, the chaplain reaches the Holy Trinity. All he says there is: 'Well, Foster, then we come to the Trinity – three in one and one in three – all perfectly straightforward – any problems there talk to your maths master'. Well, of course, it isn't straightforward at all.

Almost always when someone tries to explain the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, people's eyes glaze and ultimate confusion sets in. Well – go and look at the creeds, one might say – that'll help. Go, for example, to the Athanasian Creed, set out in the Book of Common Prayer. That document which is there to explain the Holy Trinity and much else. What does it say? Let's just look at a wee morsel.

'But the Godhead, of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible . . . As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated: but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.'

Get it? Well, probably not! So I shall not continue since my guess is that that has not helped towards clarity but probably rather the opposite. Even our readings don't immediately help – the *Holy, Holy, Holy* of Isaiah is all too allusive. So, instead of going down that path, let me take you in a quite different direction. Let me take you for a few moments on a mini-pilgrimage. Let us journey to that place in England where most mediaeval pilgrimages in the south of the country ended. Immortalised in Chaucer's blank verse, Canterbury Cathedral was the climax of the pilgrims' exertions. But oddly enough entry into the cathedral became a further mini-pilgrimage itself.

Nowadays, when you arrive outside the cathedral precincts, you invariably enter from that gate which is right in the very heart of that hub of tiny streets at the centre of the city. Christ Church gate, as it's called, now has a fine sculpture of Christ reigning in majesty as you pass under its archway. Crossing the precinct you head for the two venerable western towers and so to the great west door set between them. As you enter that doorway the great length of the cathedral stretches out before your eyes. But by no means is the entire length visible, for there is not only a screen about halfway along, but also a great flight of steps at the crossing.

So let's do a virtual pilgrimage; let's step over the threshold and into the nave. Immediately inside your breath is taken away by the soaring perpendicular arcading reaching high up into the vaults. More than six hundred years old, Henry Yevele's masonry is remarkable. As you walk slowly through this great room you feel as if you are in one vast womb-like transcendent space. It feels as if you are somehow there in the crucible of creation. Here is an image of the Fatherhead of God set gloriously in stone. Here is the space of the Father-Creator of all.

So you then move on to the crossing. But as you approach it you are forced to move upwards, climbing stairs to the great screen which once marked the beginning of the quire, the monks' church. As you stand on that great stone platform, before passing through the screen, and look to your left - toward the north transept - so you are looking down into the *Martyrdom*, as it's known. Here's where in 1982, Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Robert Runcie knelt in prayer together, the first visit ever of a Pope to Canterbury.

But more significant still, some eight hundred years earlier, here Henry II's knights had murdered Thomas Becket, the archbishop. So this place, this platform on which you are standing, is like Calvary. Here's the place of Jesus' dying and his redeeming all humankind.

Then, on the last stage of your pilgrimage, stepping up more steps you enter the quire, and passing St. Augustine's Chair, you arrive finally at the Trinity Chapel. Here we are now in the place of the saints, with the chapel of twentieth century martyrs. Here too, then, is the place of the Spirit. God's Holy Spirit fills his saints, those who have spoken of God and lived in his grace. So, then, as we've made this journey, we have effectively been *living* the Trinity. This is what Jesus hints at in his nocturnal meeting with Nicodemus. We've encountered God as Father, as the Son in Christ Jesus, and then as Holy Spirit. Our encounter with God affected us, has had impact on us, in three very distinct ways. Yet, all this has happened in but one building as part of one experience. Take away any single part, any one third and the entire edifice falls.

Perhaps, then, *living the Trinity* is the way we appreciate God's fullness as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – utterly distinct but utterly inseparable. Canterbury Cathedral is by no means unique in demonstrating this. So instead, as we live our lives, we can reflect on how we experience God through other people, through the majesty of God's Creation, through our own prayers, through worship and through this Holy Eucharist. The Holy Trinity is no luxury, no mathematical formula. The Holy Trinity is our living experience of the God whom we worship and adore.

Amen.

Readings

Isaiah. 6. 1-8.

Romans. 8. 12-17.

John. 3. 1-17.