

**TRINITY SUNDAY or the FIRST AFTER PENTECOST, Year C Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

Nowhere in Holy Scripture is- the Doctrine of the Trinity explicitly spelt out. There are however suggestions and implications which have led theologians to proclaim that God is Three and God is One: "God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity." Jesus for instance is recorded by St. John as saying that the revelation which He brings is from the Father, and it is the function of the Holy Spirit to take that revelation and make it meaningful to each succeeding generation. The Spirit does not convey new independent revelations but constantly updates our understanding of the once and for all revelation of God in the teachings and redeeming work of Christ. (Jn.16:12-15) There is at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel the instruction to baptize disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (28:19) There is the blessing at the end of St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor.13:14)

But while these speak of the Three Persons, they do not spell out the unity of the Three. And there are groups like the Mormons, Christadelphians, and the Jehovah's Witnesses who consider the Christian Church to be in error because we declare the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. That doctrine is

Declared in the ancient Creed of St. Athanasius: 'The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; yet there are not three gods but one. Such as the Father is. Such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.

This statement of Christian belief was drawn up in the mid 5<sup>th</sup> Century AD, to counter heresies of the period. It is printed in our Prayer Books, although not the shorter editions, but it is rarely if ever used in services. <sup>1</sup>

Well then, how has the Church come to profess and hold such a complex and difficult doctrine? Trinity in Unity seems at first glance an impossible mathematical arrangement. But we are not talking about maths. A number of things in our experience and knowledge can be seen to have trinity in unity and unity in trinity: **the sun** for instance is light; is heat; is power. **My personality** is made up of body, mind, and spirit. **A firm** may be comprised of manager, accountant, and staff. All work independently yet all comprise the unity of the entity. These are limited, earthbound examples. With God we should expect His Being to be infinitely more mysterious. In this world, as St. Paul says, we see through a glass darkly, dimly. Nevertheless we do see some light and we are not excused from trying to think as clearly as we can about this fundamental question about God.

The first and foremost affirmation of the Scriptures is that there is but one God: one only living and true God. In making this claim, the Old Testament Jews were unique among the variety of religions which surrounded them, all of which were polytheistic,

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Common Prayer required this Creed to be used at Easter, Ascension, Whit Sunday, and Trinity Sunday

believing in many gods. The Jews came to know eventually that this one God was to be thought of as the Father of mankind. Jesus emphatically endorsed this belief of theirs, and nearly always referred to God as "the Father", not least in teaching us to address our prayers to "our Father in heaven". To Jesus as to many other Jews who had been brought up on the Old Testament Scriptures, God was not only the Creator-Spirit, responsible for the various qualities observable in the universe: might, energy, righteousness, justice, but a vivid personality having the attributes of perfect Fatherhood.

But there is no making sense, other than the merely historic, of the Old Testament, let alone the New, unless it is accepted that this God sent into the world a man so fully charged with His spirit and character as to be in fact truly man and truly God at the same time. In the life and sayings of Jesus as we have them recorded in Holy Scripture, we find a completeness and a satisfaction drawn from spiritual truth. Jesus deals with spiritual matters as an authority, a master - not as a learner. He claims a unique relationship with God, a unique knowledge and understanding of God, and He makes His claim as if the relationship was His by right of natural endowment, and not by acquired insight or inspiration. The Resurrection of course confirmed His claim.

Throughout Holy Scripture we see the divine activity of God with men and women, working through revelation, power, and grace. But not until after the disciples had become aware of the Holy Spirit working in them in accordance with Jesus' promise, do we identify that Power as God the Holy Spirit, the Comforter or Strengthener. This was no mere abstract or impersonal Force, but a personal influence, a personal inspirer, a personal supporter - a "He" and not an "It", because the personal relationship which was set up by His influence was something which no mere "It" could produce.

Thus far Holy Scripture takes us. The early Christians knew the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. They were quite sure that in these three distinct ways, as Creator, as Redeemer, as Sanctifier, God was at work.

The Church did not particularly want to produce a complex formula having to be carefully explained to be understood. But the activities of heretics who offered teachings which were not fully within the truth of the Christian experience, forced it to produce such a statement. In arriving at the statement there were three lines of knowledge and experience to guide them: 1. There is but one God - nothing must weaken that declaration. 2. This one God had been found at work along three distinct lines. And 3. The remembered words of Jesus spoke of a distinction though no difference, between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So the conclusion was reached that the whole truth might be best safeguarded by saying that God is Unity in Trinity - if you started from God's end - and Trinity in Unity, if you started from man's. Thus could be protected both the fact of experience - God's work

in its three aspects - and the fact of revelation - the personal distinctions which Jesus had indicated as existing within the Being of God.

The Christian Faith is not that we understand the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, but that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity. If we have the experience of God who lovingly created this universe and ourselves within it; of God in Christ who lovingly sought us and redeemed us; of God in Spirit who lovingly works within us - then we have all that we need to produce a right and a responsive attitude to our God.

So we give Glory to God -Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
As s in the beginning, so now and for ever.      AMEN

## **SUNDAY BETWEEN 5 & 11 JUNE, YEAR C Responsibility Canon Barlow**

"As Jesus approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow. .,.... When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her 'Do not weep'." (Luke 7:12,13)

It used to be that the topic one did not speak about was sex. Today it seems that the shunned topic is death. Today people speak freely about sex, but seem afraid or reluctant to discuss death, as if it were something improper. A whole range of synonyms is used, like "passing over", "at rest" even falling off the twig". And when someone is bereaved it seems to be the idea to attempt to divert their mind by talking about something, anything, else. Of course that may well be our embarrassment in the face of grief. No one it seems, wants to listen to them when they talk about the dear one from whom they have been parted for the rest of their earthly life.

Very many people are unable to face the reality of the fact of death, and so is lost the full glory of the Christian belief in the expectation of resurrection to life eternal.

Of course when we lose someone we love we want to talk about them about our loss, our loneliness, and to express our grief. It is right that we do so and encourage others to do so. With our British inheritance of the stiff upper lip we are very inhibited' - other so-called primitive people can express their grief and pain in a way we cannot. But the grief of a Christian is tempered by the belief that our earthly death is not the end, that we shall meet again even though the where and how is hidden from us. We ought not be sad for those whose earthly life is finished - only for ourselves and our own loss and loneliness. For we are after all human and we feel the pain of separation, and it is proper that we should express it. And as we talk and think about our loved one and our feelings and even our inability to understand why tragedies happen, we may well find that Christ comforts us and we find ourselves thanking God for the joy and the love that we have known.

The isolation of the widow of Nain in today's Gospel can be appreciated', for sorrow can be an isolating barrier even when we are surrounded by friends. Often friends find it awkward and embarrassing to be in the company of one who is grieving, and so they stay away. This woman had lost her husband, and now she had lost her only son. No hope could have been in this woman's heart – she had no knowledge of the hope of eternal life; she had no faith to reach out to Jesus, and in fact she made no appeal to him. SHE DIDN'T KNOW, THEN , THAT He was the Christ. There is no suggestion that she even know of His existence.

But Jesus was there, and his the great point of the Gospel for today: the compassion of Christ. There was no other reason for his restoration to life of that young man. Jesus was not given to doing his acts of mercy and healing in front of crowds of people, so this must have been a special situation which demanded his pity.

The Lord does not always restore loved ones to us, even in situations of heart-breaking tragedy: that is part of the price fallen humanity must pay. But scientists are always developing and

discovering new life extending and preserving methods and procedures, and surely : many of these can only be described as "Spirit inspired". But in every situation we Christians know Jesus is there, and his heart goes out to us through our sorrow and feeling of isolation in compassion. We may not always recognise that, if we're too bound up in our grief and pain, but he is there waiting for us to turn to him. Similarly when we go to be with someone who has been bereaved, that is what we must take

with us - compassion, and the reassurance the Jesus cares.

How can we prepare ourselves against the day of bereavement, loss, and sorrow, for our own demise and that of our loved ones? Perhaps three things.

The **first** is preparation. It is a very short-sighted person who believes that tragedy will not come to him, or her. And when it does, it is too late to be philosophical. The philosophy, the faith, the acceptance must be built up and developed beforehand - and who knows how much time any one of us has to prepare? So we must build up and confirm our faith while our family and our friends are happily around us.

Next, we must **exercise courage** when the time of adversity comes. Others have faced this before, Others have come through. We will too even if the going is rough for a while. If we know how to seek the grace of God, and are really aware of his compassion, our courage will be the greater, our inner strength the stronger.

And thirdly **patience**. Every storm blows itself out eventually. Of course they leave their mark - branches are blown from trees, flowers are spoilt, bushes are tousled and flattened. But a calm always follows, and we should wait for the pain of hurt and bereavement: to ease before we make changes and decisions.

It may well be that all this is nothing new to some of you. For others this may be theory. But undoubtedly, some day we will each need a philosophy supported by faith to fall back on. If we have nothing, our grief will be painful indeed. If we **know** that our God cares, though we will still grieve, and rightly so, yet we will know the compassion of God in our sadness. Being a Christian does not remove our trials and tribulations; we are not spared grief, pain, or sorrow either on our own behalf or that of our loved ones. Jesus wept, if you remember, at the graveside of his friend Lazarus.

Faith exercised with courage and patience, will enable us to carry on. In our dealings with others in their times of stress, we are called to minister Christ-like compassion, as we follow in the steps of our Lord, who by his own suffering, death, and resurrection proved that we have no reason for fearing our own death, and indeed should endeavour to pass on that reassurance to those who are afraid.

The mourners who observed the raising to life of the young man of Nain were seized with fear. Some versions of the New Testament use the term "awe". We are so accustomed to hearing or reading such stories about Jesus as this that we tend to take them for granted and are not awestruck by them. But imagine the effect on those people! And they glorified God!

Do we glorify God when we hear of the great healing accomplishment of doctors, and surgeons, and medical scientists? I believe we should, for this surely is the way of God among us today.

**AMEN**

" Jesus said to the woman: Your faith has saved you - go in peace." (Luke 7:50)

We have just heard in the Gospel passage for today that lovely story of the penitent woman pouring out her love and devotion to Jesus in an extravagance of emotion.

Simon the Pharisee respected Jesus enough to invite Him to dine at his home, and referred to Him as "Teacher" or "Master". He thought that Jesus might possibly be a prophet. We are accustomed to hearing of the Pharisees as the bad guys, all blindly opposed to Jesus and all that He did and said. There were exceptions. Joseph, of Aramathea, who gave his tomb for Jesus to be buried in, was one. Another was Nicodemus, who assisted Joseph at the burial. Now here was another who was at least willing to give Jesus a go. Perhaps, being a Pharisee, he wanted to see for himself what kind of man this Jesus was, this Jesus who had been stirring up Simon's fellow Pharisees and other leaders of the Jewish religion. His welcome was less than effusive and probably guarded, and he received Him with cool politeness, without any of the courtesies which went with a warm welcome - the footbath to wash off the street dust, the kiss, the anointing with perfume.

Leonardo da Vinci's picture of The Last Supper, showing Jesus and the apostles sitting at a trestle table on stools, is historically inaccurate. At an Eastern banquet the guests left their sandals at the door and reclined on their left side on a low couch, with their feet behind them. It was not uncommon for the doors to be left open to admit all sorts of people, from beggars in search of food to a rabbi's admirers in search of intellectual entertainment. There is no evidence to suggest that the woman who came to stand behind Jesus had ever spoken with Him. No doubt she had seen and heard Him as He spoke in public and what she heard had convinced her of the sinfulness and the folly of her life-style. She had been a woman of deservedly bad reputation, and now she came to repentance and to acknowledgement of the love of Jesus even for a sinner like herself. Now she came to make a sign, an extravagant gesture, of her gratitude to the one who had set her free and put her back on the road to self-respect. Before she could anoint Jesus' feet with ointment, her emotion spilt over and her tears fell on them. Forgetting that she was now a decent woman and decent women did not do this sort of thing, she loosened her hair to wipe them away. To use her hair for this purpose and not reach for a handkerchief was probably an extension of her emotional reaction.

Shock and horror on the part of Simon and the upright and virtuous people around the table. Surely, if Jesus really was a prophet He would recoil from this demonstration on the part of such a dreadful sinner! But Simon saw only a sinner, whereas Jesus saw a sinner, repentant, pardoned, and restored.

To get the message home to Simon and the others, Jesus told the parable of the Two Debtors, and drew from Simon the admission that those with the greatest sins forgiven are likeliest to display the greatest outpouring of emotional response. Jesus deduced from the extravagance of this woman's display that she had indeed been labouring under many sins. "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."

So Jesus declared to her: "Your sins are forgiven ..... Your faith has saved you; go in peace." She did not earn her forgiveness by that great demonstration of her love. It was her faith, not her love that saved her. Her outpouring of love was the result of the pardon which she had come to acknowledge.

The other guests began to say "Who is this who even forgives sins?" First the calm acceptance of an emotional outpouring from a known sinner, which surely no true prophet would countenance, and now the positive and authoritative pronouncement that her sins, though many, were forgiven. "Who is this?" Time and again in reading about Jesus we are faced with that same question. It is a question which goes beyond the pages of the New Testament. It faces us, and we must answer it too.

By contrast the evil woman, Jezebel in that unpleasant story in today's Old Testament reading did not repent of her sins or seek forgiveness and amendment of life. Her husband Ahab was a nasty piece of work too - a spoiled brat of a man who became petulant and turned his face to the wall and wouldn't eat because he couldn't get what was not his. He was well and truly under his wife's thumb, and meekly carried out her orders in the villainous plot.

Elijah the Tishbite was a mighty prophet who had no fear of any person, king or not, and unflinchingly proclaimed the justice of God as he understood it. There was no gentle forgiveness from Elijah. It is a pity that the extract ends there, because it goes on: "There never was a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife."

However when Ahab heard Elijah's pronouncement of the wrath of God upon him, "he tore his clothes, put <sup>o</sup>n sackcloth and fasted. He lay on sackcloth and went around meekly." (v.27) It goes on: "Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself., I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son." A curious understanding of the justice of God - that because Ahab humbled himself he was saved and the retribution fell on his descendants! A very different understanding of Jesus' portrayal of God's mercy, when the woman's outpouring of love followed her forgiveness: she was not forgiven because of her adoration. Another example of Jesus setting the Old Testament understanding to rights.

Just to complete the horrible story: Ahab was killed in battle shortly after. His blood was washed out of his chariot at a pool where the prostitutes bathed - whatever significance that has -

and the dogs licked up his blood "as the word of the Lord had declared." As for Jezebel, the enemies of her kingdom of Judah defeated her son, and they threw her out of a window of the castle, and horses trampled her underfoot and dogs finished her off. (2 Kings 9:30-37) Here is a page of history without a lot to commend it, but certainly it serves as a strong contrast to Jesus' message of the real justice of God, a loving and merciful Father.

The Epistle puts this whole business of earning our forgiveness into theological terms. It bears on just what Jesus said to the repentant woman: "Your faith - not your works - your faith has saved you." This technical term "to be justified" simply means to be put in the right with God. This is after all our aim as followers of God - to be in the right with God.

Paul, as a Pharisee, had tried to get himself right with God by keeping the Law of Moses and all the accumulation of legal interpretations arising from it. In his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he learned that this justification is not something to be earned, but something to be received, as a gift: through what Christ has done. It is not faith that is the primary cause of justification: Paul certainly had no faith in Jesus as God Incarnate at the time of his conversion. It is the act of God in Christ, an act described by Paul as "grace", sheer undeserved forgiveness of the sinner. Faith is the condition on the human side for receiving God's forgiveness.

Although Paul declares that "a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ", this does not mean that works have no place in the Christian life: they are the result of life in Christ. It is the answer to today's heresy that a person is a Christian because he does good works, behaves in a moral way, helps the underdog. Many who are involved in helpful, unselfish social work, organised by Service Clubs, see themselves to be as good as those who go to church. Perhaps they are, in a moral and socially helpful sort of way - that may be an indictment on many churchgoers - but they are not Christian because of that. Christian good works result from faith as St. James wrote in his Epistle (2:18): "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." And, "Faith apart from works is dead." Faith must be demonstrated by what we do, by what we say, by what we are. But the reverse is not necessarily true: works without faith is not Christian activity.

So we are reminded today that great and abiding love for God comes about as we know ourselves to have fallen short of the glory which should be ours as God's children, and as we know of His acceptance and forgiveness for us, His erring children, even before we ask it. Then, knowing that we are set right with our Heavenly Father, justified, we will show forth our faith in word and deed.

To Him be praise and glory evermore.

**AMEN**

There was a priest called Zacharias, whose wife Elizabeth was a cousin of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Six months before the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary (the event we commemorate as the Festival of the Annunciation, on 25th March), he appeared to Zacharias in the Temple at Jerusalem, and told him that his prayers had been answered and that he and Elizabeth would have a son, whose name should be John, and who would "go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah ..... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:17) Zacharias doubted: "I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.' He was literally struck dumb: the angel told him he would not be able to speak until the child was born. After the child was born and named John, Zacharias' voice returned, and he broke out into that poem of praise which is appointed for use at Morning Prayer:

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people; and has raised up for us a mighty Saviour.-"*

Six months later Jesus was born. John grew up in the knowledge that his appointed task was to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus,

St. Luke in his Gospel records when all this happened. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius~ Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrach of Iturea, and Trachonitis, and Lysanias Tetrach of Abilene, and during the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. At that time John began his preaching in the country around the Jordan, calling people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John must have been an alarming sight, dressed in camel's hair clothing held by a leather belt. No doubt his hair was uncut, and we're told he dined on locusts and wild honey. And his message was pretty powerful stuff. He addressed the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to hear him as "a brood of vipers" - very much in the style of the old prophets, whose tradition had by then died out.

There were those who heard and got the message. "What should we do then?" John told those who were fortunate to share with those who were not as well off. Tax collectors, traditionally cheats, also asked "What shall we do?" and were told not to collect any more than they had to. And soldiers also asked "What shall we do?" and were told 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely - be content with your pay." Those who accepted his teaching he baptized in the River Jordan, to signify that their sins were washed away. So he gained his nickname of The Baptizer:,,

When the authorities wanted to know who John was, he quoted to them words of the prophet Isaiah "I am the voice of one calling in the desert: "Make straight the way for the Lord." (Isaiah 40:3) I wonder if he knew how prophetic his words were. Certainly it was with some surprise and reluctance that he obeyed Jesus' insistence that John baptize him. He said: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Afterwards John gave this testimony: "I saw the

Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me: The man on whom you see the Spirit come down is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." (John 1:32-34) The following day, John pointed out Jesus to two of his own disciples as "The Lamb of God" From that time Jesus commenced his own ministry, for which John had prepared the way.

We seem to have strayed from the theme of today's celebration, which is the Nativity or Birth of John the Baptist. That was dealt with in the opening words of this address. But John played such a big part in the introduction of Jesus' ministry that we should look at him and hear his message. Actually we do get a second chance to consider him, when the Church commemorates his death, on August 29th - but that doesn't fall on a Sunday very often either.

Fearless John criticized Herod's marriage with his brother's wife, and had been imprisoned for his outspokenness. After a while John began to doubt whether Jesus was indeed the Saviour he'd been proclaiming So he sent two of his followers to ask Jesus directly. Jesus replied: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard - the blind receive sight; the lame walk; those who have leprosy are cured; the deaf hear; and the **good news is preached** to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Luke 7:18-23)

Jesus took the opportunity to express his frustration with those who would not accept either his or John's message. "John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say He has a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" (Luke 7:33,34)

Herod would really have preferred to execute John immediately because of his criticism of Herod and Herodias' incestuous relationship, but he wasn't brave enough to risk the anger of the people, who saw John as a prophet. But at a celebration party for his birthday, Herodias' daughter Salome so entranced Herod with her dancing that he promised her anything she wanted. Her mother, who had not forgotten John's criticism, put her up to asking for John's head on a plate. Herod could not back down in front of his guests, and so John was beheaded.

John's primary importance lies in his foreshadowing of Jesus as the Messiah; his recognition of Jesus at His baptism; and his understanding that his ministry needed to decrease in order that the ministry of Jesus should flourish.

By the time Luke wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, the place of John the Baptist in the history of God's relationship with his people was established. Luke in chapter 13 of Acts clearly records John's place in the history of Jesus, and by that time the stories of a miraculous birth, had found their way into Christian tradition - angels, an aged mother, a dumbstruck father, a unique name, all were signs to the early Christians of the grace of God, present in John even before his birth. So we celebrate God's grace through our knowledge of John's birth, and his subsequent life story.

The Collect for today sums up best why we regard John as a saint. He is a model for us to follow. We are to heed his teaching about repentance. He lived a holy life devoted to God, faithful and humble in his ministry, and he spoke the truth fearlessly, ready to face imprisonment and even martyrdom for the sake of speaking out against corruption and wickedness.

More than all that, however, we celebrate his recognition of Jesus and what he was to become. John the Baptist pointed the way to Christ: "Behold the Lamb of God!"

We cannot convert people to Christ, for it is the Holy Spirit working in people who does that. But we, like John can point the way by our own example, by encouraging them to repent of past mistakes, to get to know Jesus, hear his words and see his power. Today we are reminded of humble self-denying ministry which points the way to Jesus. **AMEN**