

The Trinity and the Local Parish Church

Swanwick, October 1997, for Willesden EA.

Coming into a conference from outside is always a dangerous business. Not knowing what direction the content, let alone the process of the conference has taken, before you were parachuted in, can mean that what you have to say is completely off target. And this problem is compounded if you are dealing with a discipline as volatile as theology.

It reminds me of the story of the three people who were marooned on a desert island. All they had was a tin of beans but no tin opener. The first chap said, "I'm an engineer so I can calculate how hot we need to make the tin in order for it to burst open." The second added, "And I'm a physicist, so I can calculate the trajectory of the beans so we can catch them." The third piped up, "And I'm a theologian, so I can imagine that we have a tin-opener after all."

If you're not careful, theology can grow like a great cross-word puzzle in the sky rather than develop as an enabling discipline. So I'm glad to have been given a title that should keep my feet firmly on the ground: "The Trinity and the Local Parish Church."

How does God relate to the Church - and especially at our level?

Until comparatively recently it was the received wisdom in most of our Churches that God the Father had sent Jesus Christ into the world and that he gave the Holy Spirit to the Apostles who were thus sent out into the world as the founding fathers of the early Church.

This formulation used Trinitarian content - the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all used - but somehow the relationship between these three persons of the Trinity seems to have a singularly top-down feel about it. The Father gives the Son, who gives the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. And such a top down model lent itself to the implied thought that the Apostles then handed down the grace through generations to our Bishops and clergy whose job was then to impart it to the laity, and thence to the world. If that was not always explicitly taught from the pulpit, then the way in which the Church went about its business certainly gave every indication that that was how it was all to be understood.

This is the teaching contained nuggets of truth but in a rather topsey turvey fashion.

It made the claim that God's grace can only be mediated through the Church, as if we were the keeper of the keys to the petrol pump, and if anyone should want God's grace they had better come to us for a fill-up. As if Christ's Spirit had no place in the world of itself. No immanence, despite the centrality of the incarnation in all our teaching. As if God could not be present in the world without our permission.

But if God does not have a top-down, line management, sort of nature, but is a trinity of persons acting always in dynamic interplay, then we must re-think how God's imparting of grace goes on. And we must reconsider how we, the Church fit into that action on God's part. Because such a relational sort of God will truly 'relate' to creation and not just drop grace upon it from above, as if from a safe distance. And anyone in parish ministry will be able to recount experiences that bear this out! Experiences of God in the mix.

The Spirit of God is truly present in the world - is alive out there in history - we experience that all the time - and therefore the Church's task is to get amongst this divine presence and activity, in order faithfully to name it, and then work with it. To render it more explicit and make the world more conscious of the presence of God within it. God is constantly in intimate relationship with the world. God is of a relational character. So it's our vital task to discover the work of God in the world, but it is not for us to give or withhold that presence. We cannot stop God being who and what God is.

So the relationship between God, God's Church and God's world must be of a different order from a line-management model. The top-down model does not do justice to the self-disclosure of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in mutual, loving relationship. The power and creativity of that love between the persons, spills out. Their relationship is so creative that it overflows into the creation and sustenance of the world.

Just as the love in the relationship of a husband and wife might spill out to those around them. That's why we're here - because God's trinitarian love spills out.

In the image of that living, moving, active God we live and move and have our being.

In the top-down, line-management model, it is simply God the Father doing the sending. In the properly trinitarian model it is God and the world and the Church all being in a relationship. God is in direct relationship with the whole world, so there is a latent Church out there which is more than the clericalised institutional Church.

So far so good. But it is because the world, of which we are a part, falls far short of God's intention for it that we must work together to see God's loving will prevail once more. To see God's Kingdom come. And the institutional Church, the bit of the Church we can see so clearly as Church, is the privileged instrument of the Kingdom of God. Quite a calling.

Well, that's all very exciting, you may remark, but the Church I belong to still bores me silly. This Kingdom approach is all very Anglican, it was there in the writing of F D Maurice and other worthies, and the incarnational God is at the heart of everything the Parish system stands for - the Church with the people at local level. But most of my time as a parish priest is spent with the real if un-stated aim of mission today, which is to pay the quota and keep everyone happy so they'll keep coming to Church. Then we can then pay for the roof and pay the clergy. Isn't that what all this emphasis on Decade of Evangelism is really all about?

Life as a parish priest is very full, sometimes too full. But what is it full of?

Having to spend so much time on maintenance of the institution, and care of buildings is just exhausting. We yearn for space to do the visiting, to read and reflect, to pray and to reach those who rarely if ever hear the Gospel of the God of Love. And to cap it all, our local Church, which is meant to be a home of care and fellowship is so often a hotbed of bitchiness.

Being a parish priest is not easy. The ideal and the reality sometimes seem to be oh so different one from another. As they say in today's parlance, to be a member of the clergy today is just not 'sexy' any more.

And yet, and yet. After we've all had a good moan, we're still here - even grateful to be here. Immeasurably grateful to God for our vocation. Because amidst all this complex uncertainty we seem to be discerning that God is very active right now in all that is going on around us. We might even say we are experiencing the dawning of a new era. We live in challenging and exciting times.

We don't have to do any abstract trinitarian theology and then impose it on reality.

We can look at God's world today and discern, perhaps as never before, that it is a relational Holy Trinity that is most certainly at the heart of everything. God is revealing Godself as Holy Trinity in yet more ways today. From Einstein and Heisenberg to the Brussels School of physicists we are learning that the physical world is bubbling with process and inter-relatedness. Not equilibrium and stability but dynamic intertwining of continuing developments. Theology calls it *perichoresis*. Sub-atomic physics calls it dynamic interplay.

We understand society now, no longer as a steady state, like those heavy buildings of the Hapsburg dynasty, but we see society as a pulsating relationship of pressures. We recognise that the human being becomes a human being in relationship with culture and society. And the artist celebrates that we are what we are by virtue of one another.

From God's self-revelation in the world, we are learning that to be made in God's image is to be a reflection of the relational dynamic of the Holy Trinity. Creation itself is a reflection of the trinity of persons, loving so creatively together, that they live beyond themselves in one another.

It is Communion that lies at the heart of God's being. A *koinonia*, a fellowship in mutual deference - acknowledging one another's differences and particularities - very important! Yet in communion - full communion - because of the power of what we call "love" - *agape theou*

And if this is the nature of the God who creates us, then we have our model right here for how we should seek to live our lives as Church.

And indeed there are signs that this is the way the new Church is already beginning to emerge, without any conscious trinitarian planning on our part.

Already we see Collaboration and Partnership becoming central to our missional style. Our several denominations look now for a unity together which mirrors the Trinity. Allowing for difference and specificity of identity, whilst at the same time seeking to respect and welcome. Sharing in an essential unity of fellowship and communion.

The top-down, line-management parish style of clergy passing down the goodies from on high, is giving way all the time to lay involvement, Teams, parish audits and mutual accountability and community involvement.

What I am saying then, is that it is not necessary for us to dream our theological dreams about the Holy Trinity and then impose them from above upon the world and the Church, for it is just as instructive to look at God's world and Church and see what God is already doing there, and how God is revealing his trinitarian, fellowship, nature to us through those things.

For the nature of God is revealed in narrative before it is unpacked and affirmed by reason. The Doctrine of God (which is the theme of this conference) is formulated after we have given thanks to God in worship for what God has revealed. And that revelation which we adore in our worship comes to us as the story of God's dealings with us in creation.

The order is Narrative, the story of what God does; Worship, of the God that does it; and Doctrine - reasoning all about it. Narrative, Worship and Doctrine - where doctrine then in turn informs both our narrative and our worship. It's another trinitarian dynamic. And the narrative through which we presently live - be it sub-atomic physics, coalition politics, dynamic sociology, relational anthropology or ecclesial partnership in ministry - this new relational narrative can be checked against the uniquely revealed narrative of scripture.

We check our our story against the story to see if it tallies - to check its authenticity.

We read the Old Testament story of God's dealings with his people and of his appearing to Moses in the fire of the Burning Bush. And God reveals Godself as

I AM. The transcendent in the midst. A Holy Communion of Yahwistic Divinity and the icon of the desert weed. The burning bush. It is the self revelation of the God who creates his people out of nothing and parents them with his love and justice. He will save them and liberate them from bondage, and lead them on to a new promise.

God, the father of his people.

And the parish Church? - that little weed, that bush, can be aflame with the Spirit of God - it can be an icon of God's presence. As long as it does not seek to usurp his place and say "I am."

The New Testament is the narrative of the Christ event. It tells of God's love, not as some abstract quality in the clouds, but always a 'here and now' reality for you and me. Love is no good to anybody in abstract, but is only real in particular. The scandal of the particularity of the incarnation is that God gets down to earth with us about his loving. Down to earth communion.

So context, culture and particularity become central. He, the Word, reads the culture - he becomes immersed in the context, like any good parish Church should. Reading, understanding and being part of the context is the Parish Church's incarnation.

But for God to make Godself known in this intimate, incarnate way, calls for thorough self-sacrifice of the Son. A thorough self-limitation of himself. He limits his power; but he does so so that his love may be unlimited. That's why the Church Universal limits itself in the local Parish Church - to make love come down to earth.

Self-limitation is also part of his trinitarian nature. The Son gives deference to the other persons of the Trinity (witness his deference to the Father's will at Gethsemane) just as the Father, in creation, "makes space" for physical creation itself. God makes space for us - he always makes space for us. He who made the heavens was prepared to give space to us; space for us to grow as his children. Hence the cross.

The Parish Church must make space for the world, even if it feels like crucifixion. For that will be its best witness to its self-sacrificing God - and it may become its joyful path to fulfilment.

The bible also tells us the story of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who inspires release and freedom. The Spirit is there when the Holy Trinity releases creation into being. The Spirit is there to release the tongues of the Apostles to proclaim the inauguration of the New People of God. The Holy Spirit is there to anoint the Messiah as he reads: "The Spirit of God is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, to let the heavy laden go free. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." The Holy Spirit is there for Jubilee.

And the Parish Church must be a living witness to this Godly freedom and Spirit-willed release. It must proclaim the Kingdom year of the Jubilee in its context, in its community.

The Holy Spirit brings the freedom of the wind, the Ruach, setting societies free from waste and slavery; and bringing healing, challenge and wholeness.

The Spirit gives birth to the Body, and nurtures it. Ruach, a female Hebrew noun. Ruach gives birth and nurtures. So the Parish Church must partake in the bringing to birth and nurturing. For the Spirit of God brings healing to individuals and to the nations. And the Parish Church may expect to partake in this giving birth to freedom, but in the way that all birth takes place - in blood and self-sacrifice.

So it is no accident that the symbol of the sustenance of the Body of Christ which the Spirit brings, is the blood of Eucharist. Birth comes with blood. It is the Holy Spirit which we call down to give us the Body and Blood in the Bread and Wine of our Parish Eucharist. And then the dreadful words of challenge are spoken, "Do this in remembrance of me." There was never love without cost. How much is our parish Church prepared to pay?

Three scriptural narratives; of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But the Bible repeatedly tells of the inter-penetration of the three stories. Jesus, the Son, who says, "I AM the truth", is none other than the IAM revealed at the Bush. The God who creates the world is none other than the Father who breathes life into the Church as his Spirit. The Son liberates his people through the Spirit dwelling in him. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living in mutual love and deference. Dancing together in dynamic beauty.

This is the narrative of the trinity. The narrative that inspires worship and gives it its beauty. And it is that worship which then issues in doctrine. We experience God, so we praise God in doxology, and then that whole experience is unpacked in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. So the Holy Trinity is not just a logical mystery but a saving mystery.

And it is this loving dancing together of the Holy Trinity, this *perichoresis*, this *koinonia*, that I want to dwell upon for the time that remains to me.

In case this word has not come your way before, *perichoresis* is all the rage at the moment. You may have thought it was the name of the latest Greek tennis star (or eating disorder) but actually it was a dance term, indicating the way in which the dancers should energetically entwine with grace and mutual deference. So the word was taken up in

talking of the beauty of the dynamic play or inter-play of the three persons of the Holy Trinity. *Perichoresis*.

And the most mysterious thing for us about *perichoresis* is that the three persons of the Holy Trinity invite us in, to join with them in the beauty of the dance. We are invited to echo the intimacy of the Trinity in our lives. And to echo their intimacy in our Church, which is his dancing Body. For note that Tertullian says, "The Church is the Body of the Three."

The Church at every level must therefore acknowledge its own mystery in the unity.

We must adopt for the Church a trinitarian ecclesiology of *perichoresis*. We must dance together, since the Church in the world points the way to the mystery of godly relationships in society and across creation. Jesus said: "Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I in you." John 17 v21.

As the Church partakes of this dance, she will have to learn new steps. She will have to learn community before hierarchy; service before power; to dance in a circle not a pyramid; to lead as well as to be led, in love but not subservience. *Perichoresis* in the Parish.

The other word to have fun with is *koinonia*.

A better known word, it means Fellowship. Although I always feel that the word fellowship is a bit limp compared with the challenge *koinonia* brings.

Perhaps 'communion' is better.

It's everywhere in the New Testament.

I Corinthians. 10: the bread we break is a *koinonia* in the body of Christ.

Koinonia as Communion par excellence!

Phil 2: if there is any *koinonia* of the Spirit at all in you, ... have the same love for one another... as he who.. emptied himself.. even death on a cross.

Koinonia obviously means to having things in common - and a lot more besides.

In the Church, in the Parish Church, perhaps it will mean three things in particular.

- Communion, Community and Communication.

The local Parish Church needs all three to be true to its trinitarian God.

Communion, Community, and Communication.

1. *Koinonia* as Communion: This is that relationship with God that we have through our prayer and our worship. Dancing with God in the beauty of the liturgy, in the intimacy of prayer. The parish Church must live that out.

2. Koinonia as Community: This is that mutuality within the life of the Church which we often call fellowship, or solidarity. It is a mutual respect for those who appear so different from ourselves and yet who love the Lord. It is the fount of Church Unity and the bond of peace. The local Parish Church has to pray for that grace as does the Church Universal.

3. Koinonia as Communication: This is that relationship between Christians and the wider community or society. No longer pretending we have the keys to the petrol pump of grace but acknowledging that we are alongside others in God's world, where God is present and active, and asking us to find him there and join him, as the Lord of the Dance.

Communion, Community and Communication.

Many parish Churches do very well at one or two of these aspects of *koinonia* but find it difficult to sustain all three. Often the first two are well catered for - the communion of worship and the fellowship of the faithful - but then we fall down on the communication with God in the world. So much so that I suspect that many members of the invisible Church give up on the institutional Church and just get stuck in by themselves to communication with God's challenge in the world, without realising the importance of coming together for worship and solidarity.

For me, the key to an understanding of the Trinity as *koinonia* or *perichoresis* is that the Trinity is not a closed community. God reaches out and invites us in.

If, in this dance, God's arms are open wide, then so must ours be.

And just as a human being, if they are to live in the light of the Trinity, must have arms open wide, likewise the Church should not exist as a closed, exclusive community.

The openness of the Trinity teaches us that we need many perspectives. There is a limitation of truth if only one world-view dominates, or if we believe that there is only one way of relating, or only one way of meeting the Absolute. But we are tribal creatures and we so easily treat our Church as if it were the superior tribe under which all others should be subsumed.

But it is illogical nonsense to try to protect the unity of *koinonia* by drawing boundaries around our fellowship, demanding subservience within and protecting ourselves from what is outside. The centrality of unity within the Holy Trinity may lead us to think that the Church therefore must have a unity of mind and heart which admits of no argument. That would be to indulge in the heresy of modalism - to assume that the three persons of the Trinity were not actually different. But we know that the Son is not the Father, who is not the Spirit. And made in the image of God, our differences also have to be truly respected.

So thank goodness that our Parish Churches do admit of argument. I just wish they could argue about more important things than they do!

I suspect that as much as 80% of any parish priest's time will be spent in conflict management. We've all experienced how hairy the PCC get, just because someone's tampered with the flower rota. Alas, our unity is more often expressed only when we have a threat from outside.

And the parish priest? Caught like piggy in the middle, and often getting it from both sides. Our natural response is to opt for the quiet life. Indeed, all our training exhorts us to break down barriers and promote peace. We share the bishop's charge to be a 'focus of unity'. So, like a bishop, fudge issues, beam and bless!

But we follow him who was the great disturber of the Church. We follow the archetypal outsider - who died with the outcasts outside the city. And it's difficult to square that with our natural tendency to pour oil on troubled waters. We prefer to keep out any who may prove a disturber of what little peace we can maintain within.

But the Sermon on the Mount tells us that those who cherish what they already have will be lost and sad; whilst those who hunger now and who mourn now as they struggle and yearn for the new, will have blessing. By holding on to what we have we will not find true Peace. Not Peace born of the Trinitarian relationship of giving self away.

So the Parish Priest, like the Bishop, may sometimes have to be a focus for honest conflict and disagreement, before reconciliation with integrity can be achieved. The Parish itself may have to challenge the parish Church, or the Parish Church may have to challenge the Parish community. *Perichoresis* is more like modern dance than a stately minuet and it will require all the prayer we can muster to get the steps right.

And so it is that *perichoresis* and *koinonia* in the parish will be precarious. It will be like walking on water, just as living the trinitarian life of faith was precarious for the crucified Son.

In the Parish there will no longer be finance available from public historical sources.

There will be collaboration expected across parishes. The deanery will come into its own as we pursue strategic planning for mission. There will be new models of ministry, of a trinitarian, partnership style.

We could talk about Building Missionary Congregations:

About moving from a static pastoral mode to a dynamic missional mode.

Getting our Church right by participating in mission, worship and fellowship. How close Robert Warren's triumvirate is to our three earlier interpretations of the *koinonia* of the Trinity as Worship, Mission, and Community.

Second, we could think how our Parish Churches might learn from the Base Ecclesial Communities of Latin America. Intimate Christian groups, deeply immersed in their context and culture. Committed to issues which bear down upon the locals; determined to see how the treasures of the faith can bring freedom from oppression and sow the seeds of God's justice. Such communities, like Jesus, read the culture and speak so that the Gospel may be heard at a deep cultural level rather than translated into the strange sub-cultural language of the institutional Church.

[Talking of language and culture = the fly.

The Basic Ecclesial Communities are a contagious expression of the Spirit of God at work in the world. they bring a depth of true prayer to any parish.]

We could spend hours talking about Local Ministry Teams. (and many do!)

For Lay Ministry Teams take very seriously the ministry of the baptised laity.

They seek to build collaborative partnership of clergy and laity at the heart of a parish's structure, so that the clergy are one among many ministers as their co-ordinator and reflective agent.

We could talk about the Parish as a Learning Organisation.

Learning and listening. Bringing action and reflection powerfully together and thinking always systemically.

These and so many other examples of how the Church is trying to take seriously its call to model its own life on the perichoretic nature of the God who gives it its life.

All these models speak of celebration, sacrifice and partnership.

Above all they are not models for a self-centred Church bent on its own survival.

They seek to be radically Trinitarian..

But finally, what of the Parish Priest?

For all our contemporary stress on the laity, I still believe the Parish Clergy, the ordained Priest, to be of great significance and importance in the Church. For remember, the beauty of the Holy Trinity is in that each person within it has their own identity and role - but they relate in mutual deference and love one to another.

So it will certainly not be the demise of the clergy, but a more trinitarian model of priesthood and ministry that the Church will require. An honouring indeed of the priesthood.

But there must be no permanent subordinations, nor subservience, within the Body.

The President will truly be amongst her people "as one who serves" and assists the baptised in their ministries.

The priest should not de-skill the laity; but neither should the laity seek to de-skill and depress the priest by demanding inhuman excellence.

The Parish Priest will be held in high esteem so that the gifts of the whole body can be better discerned, trained and deployed. With the priest acting as if he or she were the conductor of the orchestra of the gifts of the laity.

Indeed we must expect that in future the clergy and laity will do some of their training together and lines of mutual accountability will have to be developed.

This will be a more Christ-like style of authority, bearing the marks of the Vulnerable healer.

So the priest will be the President of the Community.

And among his or her people, the Parish Priest will need to become what I call a Reflective Agent - a People's Theologian.

The priest must be amongst the people, well versed in the local culture and context.

The priest must have been steeped in the narrative and know the treasures of theology so that those treasures can be drawn up from the well and given as nourishment to the Body in its life and mission.

So the priest must be a spiritual guide. A person of prayer who is constantly dancing with the Holy Trinity of God.

1. A person of and among the people.
2. A person who knows the Christian story.
3. A person who feels God very present.

These three things, as he or she acts as president of the *koinonia* community..

And if we can see ourselves in this way, then a lot of the stress of the job will be dissipated. We will remember that God created us on the sixth day, so that the first day of our existence could be the seventh - the Sabbath day of rest. So we should not rest after work, but rest before work. That should be the parish priest's style.

My whole message to you is that the Holy Trinity of God is beautiful.

And the mystery is that God invites us in to that dance. The Parish can join in.

And the parish priest will be the president of its local Eucharist in order to show the crucial importance of this table's relationship to the whole Church. The Church both institutional and hidden. All dancing together with intricate, intertwining steps.

Dancing is a great joy.

And after all, the greatest blasphemy is to make God dull.

So, who knows, with this model, priesthood may turn out to be quite sexy after all.

+Laurie Green

September 1997