

COSMOS AND COMMUNITY

It goes without saying that without the Incarnation and the Resurrection, there would be no Church. This is why Christmas and Easter are the two great Christian festivals. Even if we struggle to believe that these things happened in the way the New Testament says they did—all those angels and supernatural signs and wonders—we can't sidestep them and say that they don't matter. And of course, it's in the effort to come to grips with—and develop—a sensible doctrine of these things that our faith is deepened and strengthened.

But there are other doctrines that really don't seem to be important, that don't have much prominence in our lives as Christian people, that don't really matter to us. The Doctrine of the Trinity is often thought to be one of these. It's so strange, so implausible, and so hopelessly abstruse . . . And let's be honest: it doesn't really register with us at all. It's probably safe to say that when we pray, we don't direct our prayers to the undivided Trinity. We assume there's no way to experience and relate to a Triune God. So when we pray we direct our prayers to God, or to Jesus, or even to the Holy Spirit. But pray to the Trinity? That just isn't done—except in the formal, doctrinal prayers of the Church.

But our psalm this morning *does* describe a way many people experience of God, a way that is almost universal. It's the experience of being awestruck at the unfathomable, transcendent otherness of God:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,
What is man that you should be mindful of him?**
the son of man that you should seek him out?

"What is man, that you should be mindful of him?" It's an existential question all of us wrestle with, including a former Dean of Guildford, Antony Bridge. In his spiritual memoir called *One Man's Advent* he says existentialism proposes that life is meaningless, and that the fear that life is meaninglessness makes people very anxious and despondent. But, "There is no proof," he writes "That we are not accidents of the earth's physics and that that our gods are not figments of our imagination; and, of course, no proof that they are not. But ... our decision as to whether God exists or not is not a decision in the realm of comfortable and largely irrelevant philosophical theory, but a decision about the nature and significance of ourselves. If there is a God,

a human being is one kind of thing; if there is no God, he is another kind of thing altogether.”

And then, a little further on, he says that one of the fundamental human needs is the need for some sort of hope based on personal meaning. “If you deprive a person of all meaning, all self-understanding, hope withers and dies, and when that happens that person withers and dies soon afterwards.”

Even though we live in an age where most people are remarkably self-centred, we know that no one finds meaning—or discovers their true selves—alone and in isolation. No: people find meaning and discover their true selves through their relationships with others. We’re not meant to be alone. We’re made for relationship and community, both of which help us flourish. And I think this is what the strange doctrine of the Trinity is all about because it helps us to see a divine example of what it means to be in relationship with another, and to understand that God comes to us by means of relationship.

Of course relationships and communities become toxic when we think they require us to become someone we’re not. In *La Cage aux Folles* Albin sings a defiant anthem, “I am what I am. I am my own special creation.” We might say “I am God’s own special creation,” but the point is unchanged. It’s healthy for us to make our mark, to stand out, to be recognized and valued for our own unique qualities. And in every good and healthy relationship, we don’t lose our identity or change into someone we’re not. In fact, we become better selves, truer selves, more complete selves.

In a world in which many people feel isolated and cut off from anything good and noble and true, or unable to be authentically themselves for fear of being singled out as “weird,” or unworthy of being loved—a world, in short, in which healthy communities of love and acceptance and joy are in short supply—in a world such as this, you and I—the Church—are called to be expressions of acceptance which rejoices in diversity and responds in love. Each of us is a part of the extraordinary counterpoint of God’s creation, so we must let our very selves resound with gratitude and joy and give space for others to do the same.

Sadly, life in community *can* militate against loving our neighbour and, sometimes, even encourage us to be suspicious of them. And so, in a world that can be so isolating and ugly and hateful, you and I—the Church—also need to work all the more to be a community where love is given and received, where relationships are forged and cherished, and where the true and living God can be apprehended and known, not as remote omniscience, but as dearest friend.

Too many people believe God to be absent, or miserably judgmental, or—worse—an excuse for evil deeds, so the idea that we need to reach out to other people with love and help them to experience the true nature of God isn’t an abstraction but a solemn duty. A solemn duty to love the unlovable, befriend the friendless, and include the

marginalized. Because it's hard to convince people that a God they can't see loves them when a Church they *can* see doesn't seem to like them.

You see, just as the doctrine of the Trinity is as much an explanation *about* God as it is a description *of* God, so being religious isn't something we *do*, it's something we *are*. It's the means by which all can experience what St. Paul called, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit." This means that Trinity is actually a vital doctrine, one which shapes our very lives and communities, one which helps us to express right now the love that is with us always, to the end of the age.