

Trinity Sunday
26.06.24
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Someone once wrote to their spiritual director that they were deeply unhappy. They wrote, *'I would like your help. I wake up each day sad and apprehensive. I can't concentrate. I find it hard to pray. I keep the commandments, but I find no spiritual satisfaction. I go to church but I feel alone. I begin to wonder what life is about. I need help.'*

And the spiritual director just sent the letter back - underlining the first word of each sentence. And it is always the same word, 'I'. Some may say this has become the unhappiness of the lonely, modern Western self.

I have a similar reaction to the Western (or Latin) version of the Creed which we say at Mass every Sunday. *'I believe in one God...I believe in one Lord...I believe in the Holy Spirit...I believe in one, holy catholic and apostolic Church...I confess one baptism...I look forward to the resurrection.'*

At best it's a bad translation, at worst it's narcissistic and self-centred. A trap the Eastern Churches have never fallen into. And for two reasons.

1. The Eastern Churches have stuck to the Greek original of the Creed: *'We believe in one God...We believe in one Lord...We believe in the Holy Spirit...We, We, We.'*
2. The Eastern Churches don't just say they believe in the Holy Trinity, they put it into practice, they live it, they know it is relevant each and every day of their lives.

Why is the Trinity so important? This doctrine that most people, even faithful Christians, think is incomprehensible. How do you make sense of three persons One God? Do we worship Father, Son, and Spirit as three Gods? How can three persons be one? Aren't we just making the faith more complicated than it needs to be – how is the enigma of the Trinity relevant to anyone?

Perhaps it is more relevant to who we are as Christians, and who we are as human beings, than we might expect. For the Trinity is about three things that make us truly human, and made in the image of God: Personhood, Community and Love.

Our great western heresy is that personhood, our identity as a person, is singular, it's my solitary possession, me thinking about myself, I discover my personhood through my own self-reflection.

The Eastern, and in particular the African tradition of personhood, is the opposite. In essence it can be summed up as '*I am because We are*' or in a Zulu saying, '*a human becomes a person because of people*'.

Personhood is given by membership of one's community - the family, the clan, the tribe, or the nation. One becomes a person through integration into the community.

The belief that '*I am because We are*' contains an invitation to discover a sense of identity that is less lonely and insecure. In the words of St. Anthony the desert monk, '*Our life and death is with our neighbour.*'

We are summoned back to an understanding of personhood that is ultimately relational. We are born into family, into community, into society, we do not walk alone, we are not saved alone - but in community.

This is true of us as human beings because it is true of God in whose image we are created. God cannot be '*I*' – cannot be one person. God is '*We*' a community, a Trinity of persons. Because God is perfect love God cannot be '*I*' – God must be a Trinity of persons so united in love they are truly One. That's what we say about marriage – why? because we first see that unity of love in the Trinity.

If we believe this then the Trinity should not be an alien idea for us. It was the struggle to articulate the mystery of the Trinity, one God and three persons, pure relationship, pure love, pure community, that helped the Church originally to arrive at a new understanding of what it is to be a human person. What distinguishes the members of the Trinity is not that they have different jobs, a sort of divine team. It is the relationship that they have with each other, relationships that are equal.

Could it be that sidelining the doctrine of the Trinity from the centre of our shared consciousness has contributed to the weakening in the West of an understanding of human beings as constituted by relationships, our sense of community, and our equality?

It is through conversation and relationship with other people that I both discover who I am and who we are. Made in the image of God, persons relating to one another, and called into a unity and equality that one day will ultimately make us truly One.

The Trinity as the foundational Christian doctrine also informs other doctrines. In anthropology, it tells us that all individualistic definitions of the human person - of you and me - are sadly wanting. Those who are made in the image and likeness of God, a God who is essentially communal (three persons - one God), find their true identity only in community - not individually.

The Trinity also calls into question all attempts to theologically justify the inequality, in status or role, of one person to another. It calls into question the subordination of one group of people to another: slaves to masters, blacks to whites, women to men, subjects to rulers.

The Trinity tells us that despite differentiation of role and function (the role of the Son is not that of the Father, the role of the Spirit is not the role of the Son or the Father etc.) human beings are of equal worth and dignity while enjoying, like the Trinity, different roles and functions within that unity and equality. If nothing else that has enormous implications for the role and function of men and women within that same unity and equality - implications that might horrify both the politically correct and the misogynist.

The Holy Trinity presents us with the ideal. We are made in the image of that Trinity. No person is greater than the other. All are co-equal, a part of the whole, born to live and love in community and not in isolation.

And just maybe, if we lived more Trinitarian lives, with less of the 'I' and more of the 'We' we might be happier individuals and a happier and more equal society.