

Being in relationships 30.5.2021 (Trinity Sunday) Michael Kennelly

Today, the Sunday after Pentecost, is known as Trinity Sunday. I believe that this is the only Sunday on the Christian calendar that is based on a doctrine of the Church rather than an event or a saint. The Trinity, the Three, refers to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, referred to regularly when we end our prayers 'in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.' The orthodox teaching of the church is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three persons of one substance. We can thank the churchmen who gathered at the Council of Nicea in 325 for this interpretation - if it does make it clearer. But does it help us understand it?

Let me take another tack. Andrew is a person in his own right. Yet he is also my SON and has a relationship with me. He is also a HUSBAND to Julia and owes her his love and allegiance. He is also a FATHER to Rosie and Ben and owes them love and care. Three aspects of one person. Is that any clearer?

I found a story that I would like to share with you. Once there was an elderly man, and one evening he was taking his usual walk. He was enjoying the crisp night air and the wind blowing gently. But suddenly he heard a voice crying out, 'Help me! Help me!' The man looked around and saw no one and so he continued his walk. Again he heard a tiny voice, 'Help me, help me!' This time he looked down and he saw a small frog. He gently lifted up the frog and looked at it intently. The frog spoke, 'I am really a very beautiful princess. If you will kiss me, I will turn back into a princess and I will hug you and kiss you and love you forever.' The man thought for a moment, placed the frog in his top pocket, and continued walking. The little frog looked up out of the pocket and asked, 'Why don't you kiss me?' The man looked down and said, 'Frankly, at this stage of my life, I'd rather have a talking frog.'

What is the point of this story? That we all exist in relationship to others. The nature and style of those relationships are vital components that determine just what might be achieved and what value they have. The thing about the Trinity to which we can best relate is relationship itself. The Scottish philosopher John McMurray once said that 'the self is constituted by its relation to the other.' Our very existence is defined by who we are in relation to others, even if it's to a frog. The elderly gentleman in our story probably surmised that if the frog became a princess, she'd run off with some young person and leave him alone again. So he'd prefer the company of the frog to nothing. One of the great successes recently with people in long-term institutional care is pet therapy. Being able to somehow go out of themselves to an animal - be it a cat, a dog, or a rabbit - has a therapeutic effect on people. A relative of Pauline's was in a care home near Luton, and

when her friend visited her with Teddy his dog, not only did it brighten her day but that of other residents and staff. Similarly, infants desperately need others, usually their mothers, in order to survive. All human experience is a shared experience. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we are made by our relationships.

For example, just think about the best experiences of your life. What were they? Did they have to do with a lover, a friend, a parent or someone else who had a special place in your life. That was the person to whom you could open up and be yourself completely without any facades or 'phoniness,' or the person who appreciated and shared things that were really significant to you. 'What times we had!' is likely to be your exclamation. Conversation late into the night - remembered with delight despite the physical exhaustion. When I was at school I was one of three nicknamed 'The Three Musketeers'. Whenever I met with Robert or David for the rest of our lives, we picked up our links as if it were only yesterday that we last spoke together. Or perhaps you remember a play, a film, a holiday, an achievement, a meal, or whatever. Maybe a time spent in hospital when a regular visitor brought gifts and hope to buoy you up. All of these remembrances were, perhaps, nothing spectacular in themselves, but they were special to you for one reason or another. We desperately need 'companionship,' to be able to 'break bread' with others.

Conversely, the worst times in our lives have probably been the ones when we felt alone, abandoned. Just like our Lord felt in the Garden of Gethsemane and during his passion. He knows what that feels like, even to the point of sweating blood. Deprivation of companionship is one of the worst possible punishments. That is exactly what solitary confinement is in prisons: the ultimate and worst form of punishment. Taking it one step further, the lack of companionship can even lead to insanity. Many infamous criminals have been 'loners,' people who kept themselves to themselves and had a difficult time communicating with others. People become 'alienated' from others and become unable to relate effectively. Lack of relationship is a terrible and troubling state in which to be, as we have found out during this past year of the Covid restrictions. Many people living on their own welcomed the supermarket delivery person because they had met nobody else all the week.

So why do we need to be in constant relationship to others? Because we are made in the image and likeness of a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No matter how little we may know about the Trinity, we can say without hesitation that the Three Persons exist in relationship to one another. God the Father loves God the Son with such a depth that God the Holy Spirit comes to be.

While the term Trinity does not appear in Scripture, the implication of the Trinity is clearly shown in our Bible readings today. The passage from Isaiah comes from a section celebrating the mystery of God in creation, all three Persons being involved, and emphasises the positive relation of the Creator God with his people. Isaiah writes to a people who are utterly exhausted to remind them that God cares for them - and that, unlike us, he does not grow faint and weary. The ending of Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church - a bickering and divided group of people - emphasises the power and responsibility belonging to God; Jesus Christ is the agent of the generous love through whom redemption occurs; and the Spirit is the bond of union and the agent of sanctification, binding human beings to God. By the time Matthew came to write his gospel, the trinitarian liturgical formula must have been in use for baptism and is implicit in the final scene of the Gospel. The strength of relationship is there.

Have you ever met a couple who are so much in love that you can almost reach out and hold it? Or friends whose loyalty and trust seems to touch for good everyone around them? Or parents or siblings whose concern for one another is so evident that it actually changes the circumstances of people around them? Such relationships are probably as close as we humans can ever get to knowing what the divine love really is.

Every striving of our souls for union, every reaching out for companionship, every urge for a hug or an embrace, every act of love gives indirect testimony to the Trinity. The Trinity says that God is community, and that we seek. The Trinity says that God is relationship and that we search for. The Trinity says that God is love and so we yearn for love. We can't help ourselves. We're made in that image and likeness. We mirror our origins.

So if someone asks you to explain the Trinity, you can respond without hesitation: 'The Trinity is the relationship of God the Father with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And because I have been created in the image and likeness of God, I can only exist in relationship with others. I am who I am because God is who he is.' May this be true for each one of us.
Amen
