

TRINITY SUNDAY (Year C): Trying to understand a divine mystery...
First Reading: Proverbs 8:22-31: God's "Wisdom" that created the world;
Second Reading: Romans 5:1-5: Our share in the life of the Trinity;
Gospel: John 16:12-15: The Father, Jesus Himself & the Spirit offer truth.

This past week, apart from domestic politics (on which I don't usually comment), two things have struck me: first, the genuine public rejoicing at the Queen's Platinum Jubilee; second, the less-publicized - but still continuing - ghastly war in Ukraine. I don't think they are unrelated. Whatever you may think of Monarchy as a form of government, what we have here is not "rule by one person" (which is what 'monarchy' literally means) but a democracy with a hereditary head-of-state. That is very different, and is the reason why Her Majesty retains so much support and respect. The last Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, killed by the Communists in 1918, was a 'monarch' in the literal sense – an autocrat who ruled by himself, with almost no democratic input. This led to the 1917 revolution, eventually bringing to power the Communist Party - a dictatorship of even worse cruelty than the tsars. When that party lost power in the 1990's, the country seemed to fall into chaos. This led to the rise of Mr Putin, who said he 'respected' Stalin for achieving many "good" things – not least, keeping countries like Ukraine in the USSR by force. This helps explain Mr Putin's invasion – it had escaped from Russian control about 30 years ago.

In a constitutional monarchy like ours, this sort of one-man decision to go to war would not happen. We rely on the "Queen (or King) in Parliament" system, by which we vote a party into (or out of) office. The head of state, the Queen, ratifies what the people's MPs decide to do. I have mentioned all this not to fill space (honestly!!) but because a democracy works not just by laws, but also by relationships between people who may not agree on policies. As Christians, we believe that this element of trust and tolerance has a divine origin – based on what we believe about the Holy Trinity.

This liturgical year ("C") has the most philosophical of all three years' first readings – from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. The writer waxes lyrically about divine "Wisdom" having an almost separate personality, more ancient than the universe itself. "From everlasting I was firmly set, from the beginning, before earth came into being. When God fixed the heavens firm, I was there....by his side, a master craftsman." Later writers would identify this as "The Word" - God's creative force. In the course of time, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt amongst us." (John 1:14). This was the eternal Son of God who became

one of us in Jesus. We believe that “the Word” had existed from all eternity as a distinct “person”, along with the Holy Spirit, the force of love between the Father and the Son.

Our problem is obvious, when we think about it: how can we use human words to “describe” (or even get our heads round) non-human, divine beings? God is not (and cannot be) a “Father” like our dads with whom we grew up; Jesus is not (and cannot be) a “Son” like the boy next door; the Holy Spirit (called “Ghost” in traditional English, and still is, in German) is not like some spook from a USA horror film. All we can do is use the language (in the nearest human equivalents) by which the Bible writers first came to understand what God was like. Apart from the simple statement that God exists, all other human words about God are bound to be less than perfect – they have to be symbolic, because we don’t have the mental tools to do any better.

This homily is not meant to be an ‘A’ level philosophy of religion (or history) lesson! However, when we mention the Trinity being “three persons in one God”, we do run into problems of understanding. All I’d like to say this weekend is that God isn’t mainly about philosophy: “He” is also about relationships. Please do read Romans 5:1-5. Here, St Paul writes that we have faith through Jesus Christ; this in turn gives us peace and hope. In other words, when you and I share the life of the Holy Trinity by faith, we become better people: unavoidable human problems, such as suffering, can help us to develop more patience and perseverance, causing us to have hope. He ends the reading: “This hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.”

I suggest that this sense of God’s presence in us is a dynamic thing – helping us to do what is right, in both our personal and public lives. The Queen often talks about her Christian faith, and in our non-religious society, that is a good thing. When Christians are in positions of public power, they are morally bound to try to do the ‘right’ thing. They may disagree about policies such as how to run industry, health, education, local government, etc, but they must see the rights of individuals and families as sacrosanct. (That is the gist of much of RC and other Christian social teaching.) In recent decades, most democracies with Christian origins have had similar outlooks on human rights, because our Bible shows us that God exists as a ‘Family’ or ‘Trinity’ living in eternal love. This is reflected in the way God has created the world - and the people in it. *Fr*

Jim Dunne.