

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD

*Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17*

Today in the liturgical calendar of the Church it is Trinity Sunday when we celebrate the mystery of God's Being as the Holy Trinity. I once read somewhere that a pastor hopes against hope that Trinity Sunday would fall on Father's day for then there would be an excuse to avoid having to preach a sermon on the Trinity. It must be said that the idea of the Trinity – Three in One – does present us with a conundrum.

There is an apocryphal story about a young man who was involved in a serious automobile accident and who lay seriously injured on the roadway. While the police were waiting for the ambulance a priest passed by and offered to give the last rites – an offer accepted by the very injured man. In the short service the Priest asked the necessary question: "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost?" The young man, now grimacing in real agonizing pain looked up at the priest and said, "Here I am a dying man, and you ask me to solve a riddle!"

Surely, to talk about the One God who is three persons does seem like a riddle – and any one who has had children knows how it goes with riddles! There seems to be an age when children come home from school eagerly telling you of the latest riddle they have heard and which they find to be excruciatingly funny, but which can surely tire you out after a day at work. "What goes up when it comes down?" they ask, demanding an immediate answer. "I don't know" you answer, hoping that the questioning will soon cease. "An umbrella, of course." Well, of course!! But they will not cease and so comes the next one: "What did the beach say when the tide came in?" In desperation you ask: "what!" "Long time, no sea." Comes the answer! Riddles, however, nonsensical do have answers that are perfectly obvious after they are told. It is clear that the question about the Trinity is not that kind of a riddle, for there is no simple obvious trick answer.

The one thing we can say with assurance about the Trinity is that it is a mystery. But there are mysteries and mysteries. Now I enjoy a good mystery story – Enid would say that I am a mystery story buff! The best mystery stories are those in which there are some very clear clues, which if you can put them together will reveal the necessary and obvious conclusion – there is a mystery about the conclusion until the moment when the detective reveals all. Of course, there are some clever twists and turns in the plot, but the clever writer places everything out in front of you and does not try to deceive you by pulling out some unrevealed fact at the very end. Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's Belgian detective puts it in a nutshell. In the middle of one of his cases he says: "Already, I think, the end draws near... the facts all point more or less clearly in one direction. There is just some irrelevant matter to be cleared out of the way. When that is done the truth will appear." (Hercule Poirot's Christmas, pp 199f) What one needs to get at the heart of the mystery is the use of reason – by using the little gray cells – as Poirot would put it. It is through the use of reason that one can understand the clues and discover the answer.

Is the Trinity this kind of mystery? I don't think so. If we follow the clues of the Bible, will the mystery of the Trinity be solved? I think not, for it is not a mystery in that sense.

But there is another kind of mystery. I know it would test the memory of most of us, but do you remember as a child having to enter a strange dark room at night. The experience was not just one of fear, for fear is of something that you know is there and of which you are afraid. What was felt was something beyond fear. As a child one was responding to something mysterious, something unknown and unknowable that seemed to tough us.

I don't know if you are a fan of Kenneth Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows", but there he captures this feeling of the mysterious so wonderfully when he describes Mole's expedition in search of Badger in the Wild Wood at nighttime. Mole feels the darkness of Wild Wood closing in on him and he becomes frightened by every sound and every sound and every touching glimpse of the moonlight. Grahame describes it this way:

"At last (Mole) took refuge in the deep dark hollow of an old beech tree, which offered shelter, concealment – perhaps even safety, but who could tell? Anyhow, he was too tired to run any further and could only snuggle down into the dry leaves which had drifted into the hollow and hope he was safe for the time. As

he lay there panting and trembling, and listened to the whistlings and the patterings outside, he knew it at last, in all its fullness, that dread thing which other little dwellers in field and hedgerow had encountered here, and known as their darkest moment – the Terror of the Wild Wood.”

The Terror of Wild Wood – unknown, unnamable, a presence and a part of the experience of his life that could be faced but never fully avoided – a mystery that would always remain a mystery.

It is in this sense of “mystery” that I think we should begin to think about the Trinity. There is something encountered in experience, but not explained, and indeed, unexplainable. Do we not face the feeling of “that dread thing” when we are faced with the personal loss because of someone’s death. We encounter the end of one, who was known, and life’s limit is made very clear, and faced with that fateful end we encounter the shiver of the mystery of life itself. It is like the dark at the top of the stairs and its encounter with the unknown for a child, or the unimaginable terror of Wild Wood for Mole. It is that deep feeling of emptiness that poses the question about our own life and to that question there is no clear answer. The mystery of being is, I believe, a part of the mystery of God. In the mystery of life we face the mystery of our coming into being, of there being anything at all.

It is out of this mystery of life that we come to talk of God the Creator. God, who brings all things into being, and who stands before time, within whom time is given existence. I am reminded of Job’s encounter with God. Job, you remember, challenges God to put up or shut up – the torments have to stop!! This is puny man crying out in a wilderness of pain – to what: - to someone who plays games with the creatures of earth? To someone who is like us, only bigger and more powerful? Are we just playthings in the hands of a careless God? God’s answer comes to Job with a shattering clarity that encompasses a greater mystery. “The then Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge... Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?’”

In other words – “Tell me Job what is the difference between the creature and the creator?” Job has no answer – except to admit that it is God who has given him his life. “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

God remains a mystery and Job stands before Him in worship and in humility recognizing that he is incomplete and powerless.

In *The Wind in the Willows* Mole, you remember, went to hide until morning came, when light would dissipate the ‘terror’. But before this mystery of creation there is not place to hide. Our darkness remains and we, like Job, are faced with this mystery of the power of creation. But there has entered into this mystery of life a thread of history by which we learn of this God of creation that he is not distant and remote. With the presence of a human life, lived on this earth, like us, with body, feeling and hopes and fears there comes a Word that enters our lives. The God who is beyond understanding, has entered our lives with a power which encompasses our weakness and transforms the way we live. In Jesus God puts on a human face, and as He came as a child, as He lived in the flesh, as he died in pain, He presents Himself to us as a person who touches us where we need most to be touched – in our weakness and our pride. We see god in terms of our very human life and he is a living metaphor for our understanding of Him.

But here is another mystery. We are able to know God as we meet Him Jesus, we see His love and his openness to us so clearly in the life of Jesus, but is this not beyond our understanding. God, we may say, is in Jesus, Jesus is the Son of God, and Jesus is God. A mystery indeed, but if God were not present in him, was his life really given for us?

As we approach the cross on Gethsemane’s hill we approach a moment of tremendous power revealed in the suffering present there. It is a new moment of fundamental change – a new creation in which we are brought back once again into the presence of God. When I talked of Job’s response to God I talked of his sense of incompleteness before his creator. The presence of God on that cross brings us the completion that human life by itself does not deserve. The creator is his wonderful embrace takes us up in his love. While God is the creator of all being, we also know that he is a God who loves because of His presence in Jesus.

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Hercule Poirot said that truth would come when some minor matters were cleared up. But the truth would come when some minor matters were cleared up. But the truth of God's mystery comes by a difference route. John has Jesus saying: "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." The truth is not the answer to a problem, but a matter of deepest life and death and it is not borne easily. We discern this truth as it comes in the mysterious workings of history. God did not merely start things off, as the Deists thought, then came down to check on us 2,000 years ago and then left us to our own devices. The history of the community of those who felt the power of Christ's presence continued to this day and continues into the future.

I quoted Karl Barth last week as saying: "Truth is not what we say about God, but what He does and will do and has done." The truth of God lies not in intellectual affirmations and in clinical understandings. The truth of God does not lie in some metaphysical speculation about his Being, but in his acting, his doing, and his being with us. The spirit of God is His presence in the continuing witness of His community of believers. In that presence we draw hope for the future. In that presence we also draw power from the past. But saying that God's truth is what He does, what He will do and what He has done is to say that God is a continuing presence in our lives, and though we may not understand clearly why we testify that God is what He had done (which is God the Father), what he does do (God the Son) and what He will do (God the Spirit), this is an affirming of the Triune nature of God. It is a mystery, but it is a reality in our lives nevertheless.

It is in the spirit's coming that we find the abiding work of the witness to the event of God's coming and God's coming and God's creation. It is in the Spirit's presence that as a community we are the power of God's being for today. The world in its secular wisdom may not want to hear what the community has to say, it may want to scoff at us, it may want to persecute, but for us we hear the sound of a different music singing through history. It comes from the power of the spirit in the life of the church, in the life of those individuals who have lived according to the witness of love, from those who have stood firm in the presence of deepest evil. It comes to us in the understanding that God is beyond all understanding – but is nevertheless victoriously present in our midst.

What is the Trinity? A mystery with no solution, a mystery which we encounter in the midst of life, a mystery which takes up lies and enrich them, a mystery which arise from our being and which links that being with the being of God. This then is the Trinity – God who made us, God who came to us, and God who dwells with us.

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