

Homily: Trinity Sunday 2020

“Most ancient of all mysteries, most Holy Trinity.”

It can seem in the virus pandemic, that we are faced with a mystery, as much about it must seem mystery, even to those closely involved in it. But it isn't. Pascal made the distinction between a mystery and a problem, and it is one we can tend to forget. A problem is an obstacle, a conundrum, something that can in principle be formulated and solved.

We know scientists around the globe are working hard to find so much more about Covid19 and discover a vaccine to combat the problem. We wish them all speed and blessing as they work away at it.

A mystery is utterly different. It lies beyond us, is too rich for our understanding. It can be entered into, explored, even inhabited, but it can never be exhausted or fathomed. Our age dislikes intensely the idea of mystery, because it directly exposes our limitations. The thought that there could be something, or someone beyond human comprehension or imagining is, of course, exciting, but it is also belittling. It puts us in our place and that place is not at the centre. Science has played an important role here, at once dispelling apparent mysteries and solving problems, and continually pushing forward the boundaries of human knowledge.

The experience of suffering and, very important, the experience of failure bring us face to face with mystery. They are stern but effective teachers of the ways of God, unless, of course, they lead us to bitterness and rancour. They cause us to question our priorities, they bring a new perspective and lead us sometimes from desperation to seek and find a different meaning and purpose in our lives. Coming to us as unwelcome visitors, suffering and pain can, if handled well, turn out to be friends. All that we hope as we recover from the pandemic, and continue our pilgrim journey of life.

Trinity Sunday calls us to contemplate the very essence of who God really is. By the power of our own intelligence we might well be able to recognise a creator behind the universe, a supreme being who is the cause of everything that exists. We might even have a sense of wonder at the beauty of creation and awareness of the spiritual qualities that underpin our life. But there is more to God than this.

For every Christian it is in the person of Jesus that we come to a full understanding of who God is. The Church gives us the very heart of the gospel today, as we meet Jesus with Nicodemus. Jesus words to him are a summary of the entire message of evangelisation.

Certain evangelical groups value this verse so much that one often sees at sporting events a poster around the stadium proclaiming John 3:16. Through TV cameras, the world is invited to look up the text and read the message of good news: “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him may not be lost, but may have eternal life.” **That is the heart of the Gospel.** Not ‘God is love’ a precious truth, but affirming no divine act for our redemption.

God so loved that he gave; of course the words indicate the cost to the Father’s heart. *He gave:* it was an act, not only a mood of generosity; it was an act at a particular time and place. One of the great, ancient and deep Christmas hymns is ‘Of the Father’s heart / love begotten’ *Corde natus ex parentis* by Prudentius. b 348. The hymn takes us from the chaos of the opening of Genesis, ‘Ere the world from chaos rose, He is Alpha: from that Fountain all that is and hath been flows; He is Omega, of all things yet to come the mystic Close, Evermore and evermore. (*Well worth reading*) for it takes us later to the manger of Bethlehem: to Jesus, who reveals God to us as a heavenly Father: his Father and our Father. It is Jesus who shows himself to be the Son of that Father, and ourselves as his brothers and sisters. It is Jesus who promises to send the Holy Spirit as a gift from his Father and himself so that they might make their home within us. In word and action, Jesus teaches us the truth about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, something we could never fully grasp by reasoning alone.

When he spoke to Nicodemus, Jesus didn’t use the language of philosophy to explain why he had been sent by the Father: he used the language of love. So at the heart of the Gospel we hear that God’s relationship with the world is rooted in love. It is not rooted in suspicion or condemnation as rumour has led so many to believe. It is God’s radical love which gives the world its importance: it is the same love which gives all of us our essential dignity. I reaffirm some words of Cardinal Hume you’ve heard from me before ‘God cannot count. Everybody is number one. God became man not for a crowd, but for each one of us; and He doesn’t take his eyes off us, not to catch us out, but because he loves us so much.’

It is that loving Father who sends his beloved Son so that the way to eternal life might be opened up for all. The Father and the Son exist in a relationship of love and the bond of love that binds them together is the Holy Spirit. The God of tenderness and compassion, revealed to Moses in the 1st reading, is now shown completely as the God who is a community of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, existing as one in a relationship of perfect love.

It was St Patrick who famously used the three-leafed shamrock to explain the unity of God in three persons. The mystery of the Trinity is not a problem that needs to be solved. It is an experience of faith which we are called to encounter. We do this by allowing ourselves to be loved by the God who is love.

By opening our hearts to the living love of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon us, we are drawn into the loving relationship that exists between the Father and the Son. Jesus consistently referred to himself as the one who had been sent by the Father, and that he spoke and acted in the very person of God. The earthly mission of Jesus is part of the heavenly plan of the Father, who displays the depth of his love through the sacrifice of his Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. I leave with you some thoughts on mystery by Cardinal Hume.

Mystery

The meaning of things, and their purpose is, in part, now hidden, but will in the end become clear. The choice is between the mystery and the absurd. To embrace the mystery is to discover the real. It is to walk towards the light, to glimpse the morning star, to catch sight from time to time of what is truly real. It is no more than a flicker of light through the cloud of unknowing: a fitful ray of light that is a messenger from the sun which is hidden from your gaze. You see the light but not the sun. When you set yourself to look more closely, you will begin to see some sense in the darkness that surrounds you. Your eyes will begin to pick out the shape of things and persons around you. You will begin to see in them the presence of the One who gives them meaning and purpose, and that it is he who is the explanation of them all.

Cardinal Basil Hume. (1923-1999)