

PAPER/WORKSHOP: The Trinity: *The Community of Love and Paradigm for all Communities*

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Introduction

I will offer no apology for the fact that the start of this session will be theologically oriented. Properly understood, theology is the stuff of life. There is nothing more practical than theology, nothing that impinges on our lives as much as theology. We all have our theologies. Our theologies both determine and are made evident by our world-views. They determine what we will do in different circumstances and how we relate to one another.

I should also say that I will be using traditional, biblical terminology for the members of the Triune Community, i.e. Father, Son and Holy Spirit and, though God is neither male nor female, God's self-revelation in mainly – but not only – masculine terms means that I will often be referring to "He", 'Him' or "His".

We all live – or, at least, work – in communities we call Anglican schools. They may vary from each other in many ways but, simply because they involve numbers of people in relationship, whether staff or students, they are communities. We are also part of a community of Anglican schools. That we consider ourselves as a broader community is evident by the associations to which we belong – e.g. AASN – and this very conference.

It also needs to be said that these communities are communities of faith. One of the stated purposes of the AASN and these conferences is '...To encourage Christian mission and outreach through schools of the Anglican Communion in Australia.' (Mr Chris Ellis, Report to Twelfth General Synod – Brisbane, 21-27 July 2001).

With a conference title such as ours has, "FAITH, HOPE and LOVE", it seemed a good opportunity to take one of those words, at least, and not see what *we* can do with it or to try and work out how well *we* are expressing it, not immediately, anyway, rather, to open ourselves to it and see what it does for and to us. Paul, who put these words together in 1 Cor 13, concludes his famous chapter on love with:

'So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.'

And *love* is the word on which we will be concentrating.

The questions I want to put to you are: As communities of faith, how do we determine how we should relate within and between our communities? What is it that guides us in the way we deal with others – of whatever level – who share in our communities? How does love work itself out within and between our communities?

Let me say at the outset that I am not providing answers for this. My hope is that as we look at love as it is expressed *within* and *by* the Trinity we will be inspired to see what the implications are for us and for our own communities.

The proposition that I would put to you is that the Trinity, the Community of the Godhead, is surely *the* Community of love and the paradigm for *all* communities, particularly communities that claim to be communities of faith.

How, then, is love expressed within that Community? How is love expressed by that Community to the creation?

The Triune Community of Love

Firstly, then, how is love expressed within the Triune Community of the Godhead?

Now I am assuming a familiarity with the Christian and biblical understanding that God is One. There is one God but in this one God we have the Father, who is God, the Son, who is God and the Holy Spirit, who is God. One God, three Persons. As a friend of mine once said, “Their substances are fused but their Persons are not to be confused.”

There is nothing more certain than this, that God in His Triune being is a Community. In that Community are the Father, the Son and the Spirit in relationship, the Three constantly, eternally and dynamically relating. I say ‘dynamically relating’ because we ought never to think of God in any way as static. The term the Church (John of Damascus – c.675 – c.749; ‘Greek theologian and last of the great Eastern fathers’) once used is *perichoresis*. Another term used to translate *perichoresis* (Greek to Latin) – was *circumincessio* or *circumincession*.

The doctrine of *perichoresis* or *circumincessio* is vital for our understanding of the Trinity, and so for human relationships. The two terms generally cover the idea of the co-inherence of the Three Persons, that is, ‘the Persons do not only subsist in the common divine substance; they also exist in their relations to the other Persons’ (Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 174). The *perichoresis* of John of Damascus spoke not only of the interpenetration of the members of the Godhead, but of a circulatory giving-receiving movement. As Persons they are discrete...and have their own personal characteristics, but as the Triune God they are One, yet in the circulation of the Divine life they give to one another so that their unity is out of the differentiations and not in spite of them. It means that whilst they retain their own discreteness they cannot be other than One together, and so the Spirit must be as much in the Father and the Son as each of them in him – the Spirit. (Bingham, G., *All Things Are Yours*, NCPI, 1991, p. 103)

So within the Triune Community of the Godhead is this constant, circulatory movement/action as each member gives to the others and receives from them. (NOTE: Gives and *receives*, NOT gives and *takes*.) As long as each is giving to the others then so also is each one receiving.

What we are trying to do here is to understand God, apart from the creation, in His eternal, self-existent being. I don’t know if we can properly do so, but we can in part, at least.

What do we know of the character of God?

Other things can be deduced, but the Bible says two things most clearly. God is holy (Lev 11:44-45; Ps 99:9; Isa 6:3) and God is Love (1 Jn 4:8,16). Holiness we can look at from several angles, there are two that interest us:

- It has to do with God’s otherness. That is, God alone is holy. ‘To say that God is holy is in reality the same as saying that God is God’ (Gustaf Aulen, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, Fortress Press, 1967, p. 102). Anything else that is holy can only be so because God deigns to share His holiness with it.
- From another – but related – angle, holiness has to do with God’s moral character; His love, His goodness, righteousness, justice, etc.

Now I’ve made this little digression into God’s holiness because the other clear characteristic of God, His love, cannot, must not, be seen apart from His holiness. God *is* holy love, God’s love is holy love. If you like, God’s love issues out of His holiness.

Every statement about God, whether in reference to his love, power, righteousness, and so on, ceases to be an affirmation about God when it is not projected against the background of his

holiness. Only when holiness colors the concept of love do we understand that we are dealing with divine love. (Gustaf Aulen, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, Fortress Press, 1967, pp. 103-104)

(I suspect that if we had not moved so far from this connection between love and holiness we may not be facing some of the issues we are in our churches and schools today).

What we are trying to see here is that the dynamic relationships between the members of the Godhead are worked out in the *perichoretic* action of holy love. That is, there is this constant, circulatory movement of holy love, delight, honour and worship as each member delights in and gives to the others. Each member is ‘other-person-centred’. Not demanding – nor seeking – their own fulfilment, each member is fulfilled by the continual giving of the others. The Father delights in and loves and honours the Son and the Spirit; the Son delights in and loves and honours the Father and the Spirit and the Spirit delights in, loves and honours the Father and the Son. So there is this constant circulatory movement of one to the other in the co-inherence or interpenetration of their Persons.

We can see this worked out in the Scriptures. Taking a few examples, Jesus tells us:

...the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand. (Jn 3:36)

And Jesus seeks: “...*not (his) own will but the will of him who sent (him)*” (Jn 5:30) and not “...*his own glory; but...the glory of him who sent him...*” (Jn 7:18). At the same time, the One who sent Him seeks His (i.e. Jesus’) glory (Jn 8:50,54).

“*The Spirit*”, Jesus says, “...*will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak...He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you*” (Jn 16:13-14). Jesus goes on to say, “*All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you*” (Jn 16:15).

So the Spirit seeks to glorify the Father and the Son. Broughton Knox says, ‘The Spirit is self-effacing’ (Broughton Knox, D., *The Everlasting God*, Lancer, 1988, p. 52)

What happens in their dealings externally, with humanity, reflects the way the Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate internally, within the Triune Godhead. This, then, is how love is expressed within the eternal Community which is the paradigm for all communities. In that Community each member is other-person-centred and the fulfilment of each is in the fulfilment of others.

How is love expressed by that Community to the creation?

Here there are three areas that I want us to consider so we will need to be brief with them. In order they are God’s love in the creation, i.e. the fact and action of creation, God’s love in redemption and God’s love in glorification.

Creation

We need to come at this from the understanding that God does not need the creation. As Paul told the philosophers of Athens:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. (Acts 17:24-25)

God is fully content within His own being – how could God be otherwise – and yet the goodness of the Three is such they choose *not* to keep what they have to themselves. God’s goodness – and His goodness is an outflow of His holiness – God’s goodness is such that He seeks an opportunity to share Himself. The other-person-centred nature of the Divine Community means that they refuse to keep what they have to themselves. God seeks, then, to broaden the Community, to blow it out, as it were, so that the threefold Community of love might become a manifold Community of love where the many, like the three, would be other-person-centred.

This determination to broaden the Community of love, then, demanded the creation. The creation is the outflow of God’s goodness and love. If the vastness of God’s love may, in any sense, be measured by the vastness of the creation, then it is vast indeed. The Hubble telescope tells us that we do not live in some poky little corner.

And those whom God created specifically to participate in the expanding Community of love, so that they *could* participate in it, He made in His own image, ‘*male and female he created them*’ (Gen 1:27).

Taking the biblical story as it stands, Eden must have been an incredible place. We all have ideas of what Eden must have been like and many of us try to recreate a corner of it around our own homes, but the reality of Eden, and what distinguished it from the rest of the creation, is that the Lord presented Himself there. Eden was the sanctuary where God and man dwelt together, face-to-face. It is where the growing Divine/human Community of love – holy love – began and was to grow. As the Community grew so would the borders of Eden be pushed out to contain and provide for them.

The creation itself, then, is a gift of love to us who were to share in the Community of love.

A subsection of God’s love in creation could be His love in sustaining the creation. God, in His love, and the Son in particular:

...uphold(s) the universe by his word of power. (Heb 1:3)

God’s sustaining of the creation is worthy of greater treatment because, if we venture a little into the next section, God’s sustains it for a humanity which is resolute in its hostility towards Him.

Redemption

Given this intimate, face-to-face relationship between the Lord and the couple who share His image, the disobedience of the primal pair, the self-centred, self-seeking nature of their action, flies in the face of the ontological, other-person-centred nature of the creation. For those who actually participated in God’s holiness, who had received that holiness as a gift (they had to be holy to dwell with the Lord in the garden-sanctuary) for them to take all the resources God had given them for a life of holy love and turn them to unholy and unloving purposes is a terrible deed, an evil deed of unimaginable proportions, which engulfs the rest of humanity. Rightly understood, those who did it did it for us (Rom 5:12ff), it was a racial deed, it was *our* deed – *we* did it! And we would have to say that even before God created, He knew we would do this, but He was not deterred in any way.

Those whom God made to share His holy love in intimate communion with the Divine Community, then, have taken all that He gave them for that purpose and set themselves in opposition to the One who so lovingly made them.

God’s love is seen most clearly, however, in that, despite what His creatures deserve, He proceeds with His plan to woo them and win them back. Though we may not understand many of its smaller details, history, rightly understood, is ‘his story’ of love. It is the arena in which God moves in love to redeem

His people despite their continual opposition. It is that place where God, in an incredible act of other-person-centredness, gives Himself up for us. The Father *so* loves the world (us) that He sends the Son (Jn 3:16) and gives Him up for us. (Given their unity, for the Father to send the Son who is His perfect image is to send Himself – I and the Father are one)

The Son so loves us that He willingly embraces the Father's plan – though it calls for His death (Heb 10:7; Phil 2:5-11). The self-effacing Spirit aids Jesus in His life and sacrifice (Heb 9:14) and then brings all that He has done for us and applies it our hearts and minds and consciences (1 Cor 6:9-11) so that we know the truth of it. While we blunder on in life the Spirit dwells in us, sanctifying us, putting to death our self-centredness, keeping us in the benefits won for us by Christ and ever producing in us His fruit of love, joy, peace and so on (Gal 5:16-25).

Glorification

Lastly, and briefly also, is glorification. Here we see that ultimately, those whom God redeems in His love He glorifies. That is, (and this is also a Trinitarian act), having renewed the earth, God brings them, by the Spirit, into the most intimate fellowship with Himself and with the Son. We cannot know this fellowship without being glorified, without being clothed in His holy love. Such is that glory that the creation itself, with us, will resound with it. Jesus said that in the kingdom of the Father the righteous will shine forth as the sun (Matt 13:43). The Revelation tells us that there will be no need for sun or moon to shine there, for the glory of the Lord illumines it, and its lamp is the Lamb (Rev 21:23).

Paul tells us that even now the creation itself is bursting at the seams for this to happen. He wrote:

... For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God...because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now...
(Rom 8:18f)

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.
(Hab 2:14)

Conclusion

God shows the love that He has ever expressed within His own Triune Community to the world in creation, redemption and glorification. For One who did not need the creation, who did not need anything outside of Himself, this is a great act of other-person-centred love by the Father and the Son and the Spirit. This is how the Community of the Trinity works.

If this is the paradigm for all communities, then, especially communities of faith, what does it mean for us? What does it mean for us in the way we treat the other members of our particular school/faith communities? And what does it mean for the way we interact with other school/faith communities which we often see as 'the competition', if not 'the opposition'.

Now I know that there are certain economic realities with which each school must deal, but if the Trinity is the paradigm for all communities, how does that impact on us and on our communities, internally and externally?

As I said at the beginning, I have no answers for this. Hopefully what we have covered will inspire you to consider what is appropriate in the way of conclusions and/or implications both generally and for your particular situations.