

## The Numbers Game

Sometimes our lives look tidy and easy to understand. Other times, they look crooked and incomprehensible. Since Mr Cullen in Form 2X taught us how to calculate the price of a carpet at nine shillings the square yard - giving me a feeling that the world made simple, basic sense - mathematics has left me in an ever-denser state of ignorance and confusion. I think I got 5% at O-level for writing my name. But I blame Mr Cullen's successor for this. Because I also see signs that I *do* have a taste for mathematical relationships. For instance, I have a powerful sense of architectural order which has been with me all my life. I can tell at once how many bays a wall will divide into, and whether the architect has got the proper proportion between the different dimensions of a room. And I've got an ear for music which is fairly acute as well, and music is also (I'm assured) about maths.

### Jews And Numbers

The prominence of Jewish scholars in modern mathematics bears witness to a great tradition of Jewish facility with numbers. The ancient priests particularly were addicted to numerical stories, and the rabbis were too. Matthew, the most Jewish and rabbinic of Evangelists, was obsessed with numbers. He was especially fond of the figure three. In his first verse there are 3 names. Then 3 sets of fourteens. There follow 3 stories, 3 angelic appearances, 3 gifts; ch 3 has 3 sections, then 3 temptations...my commentary goes on to list forty-three more sets of three. The Sermon on the mount falls easily into groups of three, as you will easily tell by reading it (ch 5-7). Matthew has other interests in the numbers 2 and 7; but three is his favourite.

### What Three Is Like

"Two's company. Three's a crowd." Cynics say that wherever there are two people, you've got a power-struggle. My experience in counselling couples is that this changes infallibly when a third person is listening-in. The presence of the third person introduces a new element of veracity; to one other person people can say things they don't really mean. When someone independent is listening, they are always aware of the need to get it right, to say it in a balanced way. For many couples this is enough to help them see things much more clearly - even when the one sitting in

contributes nothing by way of comment or advice. Perhaps all relationships are like that; a third person can represent truth. One thinks of the comment "There were three people in our marriage" as always implying that was one too many. On the road to Emmaus two were fighting each other, and both were miserable; "the third person walking beside us" made all the difference, even if he told us nothing we had not known already. I rather think that the presence of Christ to the two partners of a marriage can be essential to their success, constantly reminding them of their meaning as a couple - which is something far greater than their combined meanings as individuals.

### Triangle

There's something wonderfully balanced about a good equilateral triangle. It always falls onto a stable base, and the distances are equal, and there is always a variety of direction for mutual understanding. In the Christian invention of "Trinity" as a word for God, there is a touch of this delight in number, as if in God the truths we can pick up with the earthly eye are foretastes of that dimensionless order and peace which reigns in eternity. What's so eternally full of wonder in the doctrine of the Trinity is the discovery that the Eternal God is not some august Monad, reigning in lonely isolation, forever above and beyond human reach: but a communion of divine persons, continually poured out to each other in eternal self-giving love. The timelessness of God isn't a frozen, dead thing, but a deed so total that it can have no development in intensity or extent. When God the Father begets God the Son, *He stays begotten*; when God the Son gives himself to his Father, he is eternally glorified. When each breathes the divine Spirit to the other, divine love is delivered between them. There is no room for variance in these acts of God: either for increase or for diminishment. I'm always thinking to myself how tame, by comparison, the most intense human relationship must be, compared to what exists in perfection between the divine Persons. The lame attempts we make at selfless love and sincere sympathy must look fairly thin from eternity. That is why those who seek for a merely human meaning for Jesus of Nazareth - or for themselves - are so in need of the Gospel.

*Fr Philip*