

Talk 1 The Mystery of God - the Plan for Us

Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessing - choice - presence - determination - praise - glory - gift - freedom - forgiveness - richness - grace - wisdom - insight - knowledge - mystery - purpose - hidden plan - end of time - uniting all - Christ as head - hope - hearing - message - news - salvation - faith - seal - promise - inheritance.

The majority of us here have come together because of our education. We are part of a community of education. In fact, because of the particular time in which we're living, this weekend may be much nearer to what is meant by "University" than most of the rest of your experience in Nottingham.

We're here in Ilkley, raised up in a high place, to take an overview, to set our sights towards the *ultimate* aim of our life, and to free ourselves from the distortions and impedimenta that blind us from seeing it day by day, in the treadmills of our specialised schools. The Chaplaincy wants to be involved in this task because of the University's pathetic fallacy that, if we equip students to be good architects and engineers and historians and critics and medics, they will somehow automatically grow into rounded human beings. In this way we leave the all-important personal *synthesis* - the process that makes us *whole* - to chance, or at best to some kind of amateur instinct, perhaps taking for granted, but more likely ignoring, the huge wealth of tradition we have inherited under the title of *wisdom*.

We have the great good fortune to have inherited the Catholic faith, which has been central to the keeping and the development of wisdom in the West. We can use for our guidance this inheritance, in which we can glimpse the far greater "inheritance" of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Ephesians. If we are careful, this weekend, we can come to share a vision that can unite us. By our faithful belonging to one another, we can see further into the future, and glimpse the far depths of our belonging to God, and his belonging to us.

It is by learning how we relate to God that we will learn how we can most deeply relate to one another.

God Before The Creation

In various places the Bible invites us to think of the life of God before the creation. In a beautiful meditation of the Wisdom literature, we are presented with the lovely female personification of Wisdom herself, who appears in the presence of God, delighting him with her beauty, and who is eventually deeply absorbed with him as he creates the Universe. There is an effortlessness in this work, like that of a perfectly-equipped musician, a faultless painter, a perfect dancer. Wisdom is said to be "ever at play in God's presence". The Bible is well in touch with that side of scientific knowledge which stands in awe of the sheer *accomplishment* of the natural world. But before the Creation begins, it seems, *God is not alone*; or rather more exactly, there is something about God which incorporates relativity, relatedness. Of

his nature, he is perceived as relating, *before there is, in our sense, anything created to relate to*. This is an incredibly deep insight, and it makes room, even in Old Testament times, for what Jesus came to reveal - the mystery of the Trinity.

Revealing the Mystery

Jesus came to reveal the mystery of the life of God, the truth about this astonishing relatedness in his nature. He arrived against the backcloth of a stern monotheism - the belief that God is one. So central is this tenet, that it forms the first of the commandments: *You shall not have other gods before me*.

It is hard to think of an idea more difficult to sell to monotheists, than that of a trinitarian God. Incidentally, it is equally hard to discern how Jesus had this idea in the first place, so unheard-of as it was. But such was the central message of this most Jewish of teachers: he proclaimed the Fatherhood of God, and himself as the Son of God. So instead of a self-sufficient monarch, reigning in splendid isolation, high above the universe, Jesus speaks of a God who is actually to be understood as a *community* of persons.

This makes one huge difference to our understanding of religion. Suddenly, we are obliged to stop thinking about holiness as something *personal*, and think of it as something *relational*. In other words, we are most like God, not in our individuality, but in our community: not in our capacity to be alone, but in our capacity to relate.

Now, back to the Trinity. What shocks us about the last paragraph is that *it is in our relationships that we experience our nature at its least reliable*. It is in our attempts to love and to care for one another that we experience our most difficult qualities, our biggest disasters, our most painful failures. Other people are so quick at teaching us our faults, exposing our self-deception, demolishing our false hopes. We feel most ridiculous in this area, and least sure-footed. Can it be that this low doorway, this narrowed path, is the way that leads to God? Surely it is safer to seek him alone, in the path of the ascetic, the monk in his cell, the hermit. With the messy business of relationship out of the way, we feel, we might learn to pray, to contemplate, to seek the glory of God.

We need at this point to look at Jesus of Nazareth, the one who asked us to think of him as *the way, the truth, and the life*; his explanation of those titles was, *No-one can come to the Father, except through me*. We find him immersed in relationship, calling together huge crowds, looking into the very hearts of multitudes of visitors and suppliants, calling forth massive commitment from close friends, travelling in a close inner circle of twelve of them. Instead of a brilliantly-chosen group of associates, we find here a considerable presence of low-lives, pig-pens, and public pariahs in the recipe. Here are people who are notorious prostitutes and quislings, crooks and swindlers, and the inner circle is mostly composed of drop-outs from the fishing-trade, hailing from Galilee, an outlandish province not famous for high-mindedness or its education system. Problematic personalities are, it seems, grist to his mill. The power to relate is everything.

To these people, and others like them, Jesus says:

I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you.

you also must love one another. By this love that you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.

So here is the Christian programme: that we are to love one another as he has loved us. Then the work will be done, and we can say with Jesus: *It is accomplished*. The important difference about this way of looking at things lies in the quality of relationship with God. Our relationships are beguiling, absorbing, powerfully engaging, but frequently flawed, partial, vitiated. The relationships within the Trinity are quite different: utterly mutual, totally in balance, perfectly interlocking and positive. It is these relations that are the model for ours, because it was in the crucible of Trinitarian love that we were designed and chosen to be.

The key to any other person is that we should love them as God loves them. This is what Jesus came to show us, and this is what our purification as Christians will teach us. Therefore the key experience of our life as people wanting to relate is NOT to be experienced in trying to love, but to be experienced in *being loved* by God. I shall give you a Psalm to think about which rests in this experience. I hope you will be able to rest there too. Holiness is nothing but this, to find ourselves at rest in his presence, at peace and totally open to God. There he teaches us how to belong to him trustfully, as we wait for him to tell us why he made us, and what he wants of us, and where he will lead us at last.

We have a problem in proclaiming these truths, especially to young people. You have, thank God, yet to learn much about the inability I've mentioned, which turns the attempt to love into so frustrating an experience. It is natural and easy for young people to have *limitless* confidence in their power to love generously, and perhaps their hearts would not be in the right place if it were otherwise. This is already a longing for the divine dimensions that are the true measure of love. The pity is that we find ourselves so unable to experience such love by our own powers. But we should not take this too much to heart. In a moment of very deepest insight, St Paul says:

It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to fulfil itself (literally, made subject to vanity). It was made so by God.

God made his creation unable to fulfil itself. That is a stunning piece of theology, and should give us food for thought. In no area are we so clearly aware of this "subjection to vanity" than in our relationships. They are the place where we cry out for divine dimensions, and yet they labour most clearly under our personal share of human limitations. I believe that relationship is the place where most people will learn how to enter into real personal prayer, the sort that cries to God for help from the heart, and which senses the need for him as truly and realistically as a fierce hunger or thirst, or a desperate desire for rest. This longing is set in our hearts by God, so that we should not stop in the human dimension, but move through it, with infinite respect and tenderness, until we find our longing pointing us toward God.