

THE RETURN OF THE THING!

The Holy Trinity

Three into one won't go...the Trinity in Christian doctrine is thought of as a kind of holy conundrum, an incomprehensible test of credulity, a "mystery" (understood as a puzzle). If this theology had been dreamed up by a speculative thinker, it would perhaps deserve to be subjected to such comments. We should think of it otherwise. Trinitarian language is a way of thinking about Jesus of Nazareth, and what his life reveals to us about God.

Jesus as a human being provoked powerful responses in those who met him. The Gospels describe sudden and total obedience, ardent discipleship, willingness to trust; at the same time strong fear, thoroughgoing hatred, and condemnation - his death was not accidental. We find the encounter with this man represented as life-giving and healing, reconciling and illuminating. People who were touched by him responded with enormous force. The sense of *wonder* is never far away: *who can this be? We have never seen anything like this...there has never been anyone who speaks like him.* After his death it is even clearer: the remembrance of him undergoes a transformation which is similarly amazing. Most men who are last seen expiring nailed to a cross in the most public degradation might expect to be remembered only during bad dreams. This one bucks the trend. We might extend one of the statements above, and say: *no-one has ever died like him.* Could one choose, of one's free and untrammelled will, to proclaim such a story as the ultimate revelation of divine truth and the paragon of humanity? Could one ever have designed the Christian church as a piece of business strategy? No-one could believe it saleable...*Follow this man, we say, you too could be condemned to death!* It seems to me that the sheer fact of the power of Christianity bears witness to the powers people saw - and see - in Jesus. The question, therefore, *who can this be?* requires some very special answer.

The Scriptural sources set out themes for our thinking. One of the ways in which they express the wonder of Jesus is the *miracle stories*. In a scientific age these present us with more questions than answers: our tendency is to subject them to critical analysis, which is certainly not what their authors intended us to do. Some of them represent a kind of cosmic authority - like the moment where he calms the storm or walks across the sea. But more frequently they concern his meeting with people. These accounts express the way in which Jesus met others not looking for their gifts, or seeking to exploit, but looking for their poverty, their suffering, their pathology. This novel approach to others extends into the moral field, as the overtly righteous and orderly are passed over in favour of the morally dubious or frankly sinful; and in the middle ground between the psychic and the ethical, the great symbol of Jesus' mission must be the story of his dealings with the demonically possessed. Everything we hear speaks of his assured *power* in these problematic areas; he is not even disconcerted in the face of death. However one reads these persistent traditions, they make claims for Jesus which go far beyond the merely marvellous; and in every case we have to deal with the final paradox, expressed so clearly at the Cross: *He saved others, he cannot save himself!* (Mark 15:31)

Jesus prayed Beside the theme of divine power in Jesus comes the constant theme that this man *prayed to God*. His address is characteristic, and at the moment of his agony in the garden the oldest of the Gospels sets on his lips the Aramaic endearment *Abba*, a uniquely intimate word from a son to his father. Who is this man who so addresses the Most High? And what kind of favour from God brings him to this depth of abandonment?

Jewish religion does not prepare us for the figure of the Son of God, as Christian faith presents him. The Creed of Israel insists on the oneness of God; this stern monotheism sets the nation

apart from the pagan world about it (see Isaiah 40:25 >end, 43:8-13, &c). To insist on the One is to hold the line against the Philistines, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Romans. Jesus was Jewish: so whence comes this image of a divine Son praying to a divine Father? It is, so to speak, Jewishly unthinkable; perhaps this is why the first Christians do not say it (Paul never calls Jesus *God*).

The Fourth Gospel is the one which most enters the inner world of the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and God the Father. John contains the clearest expression of the divinity of Jesus, representing him from the first chapter as the Word of God, who is himself divine. *The Word was with God, and the Word was God...the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us, and we saw his glory as the only Son of the Father.* In John the Jews push home their question, with Jesus at the bar of their tribunal: Who are you? (8:25) Who are you claiming to be? (8:53) In 10:22-39 things reach a crisis as they ask him directly to claim divine sonship, for which he would be stoned. It deserves to be remembered that Jesus' sentence of death was incurred because of his evident *blasphemy*. If he had chosen to unsay this he would not have been condemned. He died for his claim. The only logical conclusion is that he himself believed what he said about himself. Either he was deluded, or he was divine. One has to ask whether there is a case for his delusion. He is quite sure about his relationship with God; it is very simply said (10:30): *The Father and I are One!*

The development of doctrine took centuries of testing of various thoughts and modes of expression. The pendulum swung between emphasizing the humanity of Christ and the divinity: the *Ebionites* thought of Jesus as the (human) Jewish Messiah, who is anointed with the Holy Spirit at his Baptism and becomes Son of God. The *Gnostics* thought he was divine, and only displayed the appearance of humanity (without really assuming it). This leaves human nature unredeemed, and the Catholic response was the development of the theology of Incarnation, taking the first passage of John as its source: the one who appeared on earth was the Eternal Word, who existed with the Father before creation. Thus his appearing was only the manifestation of a relationship that had eternally existed within the Godhead. *Arius* was so insistent on the oneness of God that he denied that the Son is truly God; he said that the nature of the Son simply replaced the human soul in Jesus of Nazareth. Orthodox belief insists on both full humanity and full divinity co-existent in Jesus Christ. The Creed of the Council of Nicaea (325) replied that Jesus was "of one substance with the Father", and that he "became man". *Nestorius* practically separated him into two persons, in his urge to preserve the fulness of his humanity; the Council of Ephesus (431) condemned this view, in its simple statement that the one who is born of Mary, is God. The last of the great "Christological Councils" was Chalcedon (451) which declared that there are two natures in Christ; the difficulty of reconciling the attributes of God and humanity in one person is well-known to us. But theology insists on such tensions, relating them to the tension which Christians experience in trying to live the risen life of Easter. If one recognises divine life in Jesus Christ, then the theology of the Trinity becomes a requirement for the understanding of God.

The Spirit The indwelling of God in the Christian church is the third element where Christian experience advances knowledge of God. As in all Trinitarian language, the heart of the three persons is in relationship: the Father is the Father of Jesus, the Son is the Son of the Father, the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Thus at the absolute heart of all existence there is not a lonely monotheism, but *relationship*.