

Trinity 1, 2016

1 Kings 1. 22-23, 41-43; Psalm 96. 1-9; Galatians 1. 1-12; Luke 7. 1-10

Something struck me forcibly as I looked through the readings for today. It was the age-old tension between the Chosen People's sense of exclusive privilege, superiority, of being 'the special one'; and on the other hand, a nagging awareness that God choosing them incurred some responsibility to the wider world – that other peoples and nations mattered too.

I shall spare you samples of the OT's many xenophobic outbursts and threats against enemies and foreigners, and use today's more edifying examples of the wider vision. 'Sing to the Lord, all the whole earth... Declare his glory among the nations and his wonders among all peoples.' And Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple was not just for God's chosen people, but for the foreigner too, that their prayers may be answered and that 'all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you.' This echoes the oft-repeated command throughout the Torah, to give special care to the poor – orphans and widows, and *also* to 'the foreigner in your midst.' In Isaiah, looking to the restoration of Israel after the exile in Babylon, God addresses his Servant: 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'

Yet so often the xenophobia re-appears: foreigners, seen as enemies, become demonized. The fact was overlooked that even Moses himself, overburdened with responsibilities for that great complaining crowd in the Sinai desert, had to take advice from his gentile father-in-law – who taught him how to delegate. One of the most heart-warming examples of personal loyalty in the whole OT is Ruth, a Moabite woman. In the NT, the Holy Family themselves receive asylum in Egypt – in that age-old enemy! And in today's Gospel, there is Jesus finding 'greater faith than any in Israel' in someone who's not only a gentile, but an officer in the enemy army of occupation. St Paul, with his mission all over the Mediterranean world, saw this not as a rejection of his Judaic upbringing, but its fulfilment. Surely, God is God of all people, not the possession of any group or nation, however special they feel.

If humanity, and indeed the whole world, really are God's creation (leave aside the *how* of creating for now) then they must to some degree reflect the nature of the Creator. St Paul in Romans 1: 'Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made'. Now God, in that special but troublesome insight of Christianity, is Trinity. Bear with me: I know it all gets so complex, and we've Trinity Sunday (it's sooo last week!); but it is significant. Basically it's a particular example of unity in diversity and diversity in unity. *Anything* we say about the actual nature of God is bound to be an approximation, an analogy, or metaphor; even the 'three persons' are not persons like you or me; the original Greek word *hupostasis* means simply 'an underlying something' or substance. But using human analogies can point us to important things about the God: after all, we are created in God's image. And Trinity tells us the nature of God is complex, has different aspects and powers; and yet is a unity, is One, the three

'persons' joined intimately in mutual love. Different, yet even sharing each other's qualities in unifying communion. That, paradox or mystery, is of the very essence of God's own nature; and is expressed in humanity and in the natural world.

Rather surprisingly, today's science faces a similar paradox. The problem of things that we can't describe in ordinary language, and can't even imagine, ideas contrary to common sense. And more, the problem of things whose parts can only be fully understood by understanding the whole, but the whole could only be understood by understanding the parts. That's to put it very crudely, but, for example, a quantum entity that has had contact with another – then, anything done to one will instantaneously happen to the other, even if they've become widely separated. They behave as one thing, yet they're separated in space. We've got used to hearing about space-time, but I still find it hard to take on board that they are so interlinked that you can't have one without the other. To make it even less common-sense, matter itself is part of the same ungraspable whole – matter as distortions in space-time-matter continuum, whose effect we experience as gravity. [Ours not to reason How; ours just to utter Wow!] **The Point:** the point is that essential inter-relationship *within* the fundamentals of the physical universe – not just *between* them but *within* – that seems to be a basic fact of existence. And a similar essential relationship within one inseparable whole is also in the most fundamental of all, namely God.

This parallel is put forward by John Polkinghorne – former professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge and Master of Queens' College, and an ordained Anglican priest. I've been dipping into his collection of essays by both physicists and theologians (he himself is clearly both). What is striking is that while much of the mysteries both of the physical universe and of the divine, remain beyond our understanding, yet how clear it is that *relationship* – being part of a greater whole and *not* atomized, self-contained, independent individuals, yet not absorbed into a single, amorphous unit – this inter-relationship is found at all levels of existence, from sub-atomic particles to God, via bricks and mortar, eco-systems, communities, nations and religions. We're learning the hard way how it applies to the parts of our planet, where pollution from industry and destroying forests in temperate and tropical parts can cause the polar ice to melt, which will flood low-lying land and change the world's climate.

And how true it is of human groupings, where those who feel they are the only ones who are right and good, can end up isolating themselves and mutually reinforcing their own arrogant certainties. From the fortress of shared prejudice, it is easy to demonize the 'Other'. Yet God's command is to be generous and welcoming to the other, the stranger, for they too reflect something of the creator God, whose very nature is the union of differences.

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