

TRINITY SUNDAY YEAR C 2010

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Ps 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

Does God as Trinity really matter?

I spent a lot of time this week staring at an empty screen, poised to write this sermon. Not uselessly – a lot of thinking was going on. And my conclusion: in short: God is complicated. The mystery of the Trinity is like the Eucharist – as soon as you think you've arrived at some sort of understanding, you discover another door opening to yet further depth..

So - why bother about the Trinity? It's complicated – why not just leave it as a mystery? Why allocate a complete Sunday as Trinity Sunday? And why now, at the beginning of what the Church calls the "Ordinary Season". Does it really matter whether we get the whole idea straight? Does it matter that we might have more of a grasp on God the Father than on Jesus, or the Holy Spirit; or more of a grasp on Jesus than on the Holy Spirit or God the Father? Does it matter if we relegate the Spirit to being "it", or an abstract impersonal, energy force or an influence?

Lots of questions, aren't there? I'm going to strike out in surprising direction. Rather than taking us into the Bible at this point to answer these questions, I'm going to take us into another best-seller of recent years: *The Shack*, by Paul Young. I know quite a few of you have read it, and it's a book that needs to be spoken about, although here we'll only take a glance. It's an interesting and quite riveting book; and it has split the world of Biblical commentators into camps that either applaud it as thought provoking and compellingly plausible, or label it as dangerous and heretical blasphemy.

It's fiction, not theology, and we need to remember that; but most certainly, there's some stark imagery that has the potential to confront us to re-evaluate our notions of God the Trinity. So on this Trinity Sunday, let's see how the offerings from this book can provoke us into opening ourselves to God the Trinity.

For the uninitiated: without getting into the storyline details, the central character is Mackenzie, or Mack, who has been living in what he describes as "The Great Sadness" since his young daughter was brutally murdered, three or four years earlier. Then Mack finds himself led by somewhat mysterious means back to the shack where it all happened. There he is warmly welcomed and embraced by a large Afro-American woman, named Elouisa or Papa by her friends, a small Asian woman named Sarayu, meaning 'wind', and a middle Eastern man, looking like a labourer, named – guess- Jesus.

From the book:

"Thoughts tumbled over themselves as Mack struggled to figure out what to do. Was one of these people God?Since there were three of them , maybe this was a Trinity sort of thing. But two women and a man and none of them white? Then again, why had he naturally assumed that God would be white? He knew his mind was rambling, so he focused on the one question he most wanted answered. "Then," Mack struggled to ask, "which one of you is God?". "I am", said all three in unison. (p.89)

So- a provocation here – what picture of God do we hold? A singular person? Male? With a white beard, like many pictures and icons depict? How limited and limiting is your image of God?

Going on with the story, Mack asks the questions that many of us struggle with and possibly never ask out loud.

"But what difference does it make that there are three of you and you are all one God?" Papa grinned. "Mackenzie, it makes all the difference in the world! We are not three gods, and we are not talking about one God with three attitudes, like a man who is husband, father and worker. I am one God and three persons, and each of the three is fully and entirely the one" (p.103)

This rather far-fetched story and the relationships portrayed between Papa, Jesus and Sarayu very simply show us the point, the "Why does it matter; what difference does it make?" of the Trinity: if all the Trinity consisted of was different functions or roles of one person, then we would miss the interrelationship between the three distinct persons. We would miss not just the example of mutual living it gives us, but we would miss the invitation into the circle of love that is the union of the Trinity.

In the relationship between the persons of the Trinity we find a recipe or shape for the best sort of human relationships. These are relationships in which individuality is balanced with mutuality; relationships whose basis is mutual love and perfect communication.

And we're invited into this triune relationship: listen carefully –more of The Shack -

Jesus is talking:

"My purpose from the beginning was to live in you and you to live in me." Mack, sounding rather like Nicodemus, says "Wait a minute How can that happen? If you're still fully human, how can you be inside me?" "Astounding, isn't it". responds Jesus " ...it's the power of Sarayu, my Spirit, the Spirit of God who restores the union lost so long ago.....The human, formed out of the physical matter of creation, can once more be fully indwelt by spiritual life, my life." (p.114-115)

This is the spirit promised to Jesus' followers, as we heard in today's Gospel, and throughout the Easter Season. The holy Spirit as the continuing presence of God guiding Christian life and continuing Jesus' mission. The God of love who sent Jesus (Love incarnated) into the world, has gifted us with "the Spirit of love".

Listen some more:

"Mackenzie,We are a circle of relationship, not a chain of command..... What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power.As the crowning glory of creation, you – [humankind] – were made in our image, unencumbered by structure and free to simply be in relationship with me and one another...We

Rev Robyn Boyd, Church of the Ascension, Burwood East, Vic.

want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we already know within ourselves. We created you, the human, to be in a face-to-face relationship with us, to join our circle of love"
(p.124, 126)

The Shack's obviously not Scripture; there are flaws in theology and doctrine when we dig into the whole book, but there's some simple retelling and reframing of the Trinity that, if we're open, can confront us and redirect us personally to the possibility of personal relationship with God the Trinity; and call us into a renewed sense of union and community that gathers humanity into God and that breathes God's self into our everyday living.

Does God as Trinity really matter? The depiction of delight and communion of relationship between the Shack's Trinity characters alerts us to the circle of relationship of pure, unimpeded love between and amongst the persons of the Trinity, and the delight of that Triune God in her/his inhabited world. And we're drawn into the union or communion of that relationship of love. For us, there's a personal relationship with one God; not separate relationships with whatever we think of God the Father, Jesus, and Spirit – and take note that the Holy Spirit as some sort of impersonal life-energy has no part in this God. We can't have personal relationship with impersonal life-force or energy.

And all this matters – not only are we shown how to live in relationship, but we go beyond the "theory" or modelling. We're filled with the Spirit of God that makes it possible for us ourselves to live and breathe that communion. It goes way beyond the personal, although our own personal relationship with God must be part of it. Lives that are a personal response to a personal God result in participation in community. And the holy Trinity lives and breathes perfect community. No hierarchy, no oppression; there is mutual interdependence and mutual self-giving. There is a spirit of love that accepts responsibility for the well-being of each individual and that of the whole community. In this way the Church, and each church and community become a unity in which diversity flourishes and in which differences are seen as valuable and essential.

Now, with the beginning of the long Season of Pentecost, these twenty-five weeks to come of "Ordinary Sundays", we come to terms with the everyday slog of our Christian journey. Through all of the special events of Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit has been at work. Perhaps it's no wonder that we shift gears into this Season by facing God as Trinity. As we go about our daily lives, living in the world as Christ's people, we are reminded of the completeness of God, and that all existence proceeds from the fullness of God.

The call of Trinity is to intentionally take the step into this circle of love that is open to us; to say "yes" to God's invitation to know her fully as one God in communion, and to live our everyday lives in this communion.