

Tweeting the Trinity
Trinity Sunday, Year C
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The Rev'd N.J.A. Humphrey
St. Thomas's Anglican Church
A Catechetical Homily

This past Lent, Fr. D'Angelo and I co-led a Zoom series on a short book entitled *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* written by the Australian theologian Ben Myers, who is only about five years younger than I am, so by that measure, he's an extremely young, hip theologian. Because he is both a member of Gen X and an Australian, you might even call him "edgy," as demonstrated by a series of sixty-six tweets he posted to Twitter in 2017 on the subject of the Holy Trinity.¹ Since both the Apostles' Creed that we recited last week at baptism and the Nicene Creed that we shall recite this week have at their very core this central and distinctively Christian doctrine of God, I thought it might be worth excerpting and commenting on a small selection from those tweets as a way of understanding why this doctrine is so important that it merits its own Sunday.

The answer, in a Tweet, is that it's not the *doctrine* that's important. It's the *Trinity* itself, that is: It's about God. Or, as Myers puts it, "The doctrine is not a mystery. It is simple & precise. The reality it points to is the mystery." This is one reason he tweets, "When someone offers to tell you the practical implications of the doctrine, just smile and move along," and asks hapless preachers, "Have you come up with a really helpful analogy of the trinity? Well done! Now please don't tell anyone about it, ever."

Myers is correct to warn us off facile analogies and metaphors, all of which end up being heretical in one way or another—even the most famous of them, such as St. Patrick's three-leaf clover. Triangles and diagrams won't do the trick, either. This is due to what's called the "abstraction principle" when it comes to theology, that is, as Myers tweets, "Words can be used to speak of God only if they are stripped of all connotations of space, time, & matter."

When I used to teach religion as a school chaplain, that was my starting point. I would write on the whiteboard, "God exists outside time and space." A true and orthodox theological statement. But then I'd point out that it's impossible to use any language without employing the concepts of time and space: "exists" is a temporal word and "outside" is a spatial word. If that doesn't blow your mind, you're not paying attention. You can only start thinking theologically when you realize that *nothing* you think or say can approach the *reality* of which you are trying to say something.

This has led many a spiritual person to assume that because of this, *nothing can be said at all*, but we *can* (and *must*) say something, if for no other reason than that we believe we have been entrusted with some truth about God, which has been vouchsafed to us as divinely revealed. Even then, when it comes to the words we use to describe the Holy Trinity, as Myers tweets, "every word is used in a very limited way. Even the numbers 1 and 3 can't be taken literally." So what, then?

In a series of tweets Myers entitles, "Trinitarian Theology, Ancient and Modern," he writes that while ancient theologians regarded the Trinity as "the key to scripture (which in turn shapes practice)," modern theologians assert that "it's the key to practice (even though it's not scriptural)." He continues:

¹ See https://www.faith-theology.com/2017/06/tweeting-trinity-because-heresy-is-meh.html?fbclid=IwAR0DQYa2_1OIR_1ltsNyCJk-ifDh_34DvZTxc8iZSYOupTcMgAx_GjvbGHW Quotations from these tweets have been stripped of their numbers and edited for clarity in a sermon. All manuscript emphases are added.

Ancients: the choice of words is *easy* & their meaning is *restricted*. Moderns: the meaning of words is *vast* & the choice is *impossible*. Ancients: the word “Father” must be stripped of all connotations except mere relation. Moderns: those ancients thought God was *male*! Ancients: the doctrine is a tonic against *idolatry* (since it names an *undepictable mystery*). Moderns: the doctrine depicts God as *an advocate of my social cause*. Ancients: it’s the *worst* theory about God apart from all the other ones that have been tried. Moderns: it’s the greatest theory ever!

Those last two compare/contrast tweets are amongst the most important points to grasp: Those of us who cherish Nicene orthodoxy, as I do, need not get defensive when people attack the doctrine because it is, after all, only “the worst theory about God apart from all the other ones that have been tried.” And what makes this terrible theory so great is that every other alternative that has been proposed, even up to the present day is worse than what it proposes to replace!

This is especially true when attacks on the Trinity are rooted in misapprehensions about what it’s always meant. We tend to project our latter-day hang-ups about sex and gender, power and inequality, race and class onto it, and turn the Trinity *either* into the doctrine that’s keeping us *oppressed* or the doctrine that will *set us free*. But the doctrine does *not* depict God as an advocate of *any* social cause. The only thing the doctrine advocates is *a right understanding and worship of God as understood through the witness of Christian revelation*.

This being the case, what *use* is this doctrine? Thankfully, Myers addresses the “usefulness” of the doctrine in several tweets, including:

In recent theology, much has been written about the grandiose implications of the doctrine. I think its usefulness is much more *limited* but also more *precise*. The doctrine is not a revelation of God. But it is *a reliable framework* for reading [the Old Testament and the New Testament] as a coherent witness to the one God. The doctrine doesn’t have any adequate words for talking about God. But it’s *a procedure for speaking faithfully and truly with inadequate words*. The doctrine doesn’t have special insight into God’s uniqueness. But it is *a refusal of projection & a constant warning against idolatry*.

Hence, as he writes by way of a “practical afterword,” “This doctrine doesn’t create communal bliss, gender equality, social liberation, et cetera. *It just helps you not to be an idolator.*”

But the doctrine of the Trinity does “do” a few things well: “The doctrine *explains the logic of the economy of salvation*. When we see the Son acting, it is the triune God acting in the revelation of the Son. The doctrine shows how the language of revelation can be used *confidently* and with *precision* to speak of *unknowable mysteries*.” This is because, “The mystery is in the *reality*, not in the doctrine.”

These are but a few of the insights Ben Myers provides into the doctrine at the heart of our confession of faith. I commend them all to you, which you can find by Googling “tweeting the Trinity.” Whether you read them all or not, however, I agree with Myers that “a fitting communal response is not ‘Trinity Sunday’ but the whole church year as a *symbolic participation* in the economy of God’s saving work as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” To which I say: It is to *this* work we now turn as we recite the words of the Nicene Creed and put them into action in our worship and in our lives.