

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Trinity Sunday

7 June 2020

“Three Problems, One God”

Readings: Exodus 34: 1-8; Song of the Three Young Men 29-34;
2 Corinthians 13: 11-13; Matthew 28: 16-20.

It is Trinity Sunday, and so I appropriately bring you three problems to consider. They are:

1. A problem with emperors,
2. A problem with church, and
3. A problem with humanity.

A Problem with Emperors

In the year 390AD, when Theodosius ruled the Roman Empire, the people of Thessalonica complained about the aggressive behaviour of a garrison of Goths resident in their city. The Emperor refused to listen to them or act. It resulted in a riot, in which the garrison commander was killed.

The Emperor was incensed at this and ordered the Goths kill all the people who were then gathered in the circus, to teach them a lesson. A witness to the event wrote:

“... the anger of the Emperor rose to the highest pitch, and he gratified his vindictive desire for vengeance by unsheathing the sword most unjustly and tyrannically against all, slaying the innocent and guilty alike. It is said seven thousand perished without any forms of law, and without even having judicial sentence passed upon them; but that, like ears of wheat in the time of harvest, they were alike cut down.”
(Theodoret of Cyrus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*)

In reaction to this, Ambrose Bishop of Milan, excommunicated the Emperor and demanded that he make public penance for his wrongdoing. After eight months of sobbing regret, Theodosius sought God's (and Ambrose's) forgiveness and was restored to the church; but only after he confessed his wrongdoing, and had created a new law that required a thirty day wait before execution of a death sentence.

The fourth century had rough justice but even then, there was law, and an Emperor of faith who had done wrong could admit his mistake and seek forgiveness; despite much evil having been done. As the Psalmist wrote: 'do not put your trust in princes' (Psalm 146: 3).

In the Roman Empire, the authority for office was determined by the capacity to wield temporal power. Yet, Archbishop Ambrose understood the importance of moral and spiritual power and was able to impress this upon the Emperor, who ultimately responded to it. Sadly, in this past week we have witnessed an Emperor who does not admit any mistake, nor seeks forgiveness and reconciliation, nor understands moral and spiritual authority.

The Bible teaches:

“The Lord God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty....” (Exodus 34: 6-7)

and the response to this is to bow one’s head, seek forgiveness, and worship God. The response is not to blame others, nor to abuse the weak, nor is it to threaten or wreak violence. Instead, as Christians, we are called to be bringers of peace, love, understanding, and justice - as Jesus taught.

A Problem with the Church

But back to Theodosius; it was he who, in the spirit of Constantine the Great, finally established Christianity as the state religion. Constantine wanted a religion that was fit for an empire, but it had a few problems at the time – especially with respect to the intellectual basis for its beliefs.

To address this, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 to sort out the problem of the relationship between God and Jesus. After much deliberation (and conflict), the Council affirmed that ‘God the Father’ and ‘God the Son’ were of “one substance”, thereby affirming equality between them. In its day it was a big decision, but it also indicated the ongoing influence of Greek Stoic philosophy in the early church.

After Constantine, ideas about the nature of God and humanity continued to be hotly debated. This was the time of the great heresies, and such matters tended to be worked out through argument, political conniving, and sometimes violence. Unsurprisingly, beliefs concerning the nature of God emerged that did not reflect the position previously decided at the Council of Nicaea.

Along came Emperor Theodosius, who was a dogmatic traditionalist. He went about expelling those who were declared heretics, eventually decreeing Nicaean Trinitarian Christianity to be the only legitimate state religion. He also called a Church Council at Constantinople that finally decreed a Trinity of equality between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in all respects. This is the orthodox position we have inherited today.

As an aside, part of the Creed that we recite states that the Holy Spirit ‘proceeds from the Father AND THE SON’. This became one of the presenting problems that gave rise to the split between the Western (or Latin) and Eastern Orthodox churches around one thousand years ago.

The Eastern Church accused the west of heresy, saying it put the idea of hierarchy into the Trinity by subordinating the Holy Spirit to both the Father AND the Son. The words ‘and the Son’ (also known as the filioque clause) did not appear in the texts of the early church councils but emerged several hundred years later. It finally led to the great schism in the ninth century between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. To this day, Orthodox churches do not use the phrase ‘*and the Son*’, but most western churches do.

The church has not always worked out its doctrines in a virtuous manner, sometimes preferring aggression, schism and division over peace and unity, as can be seen even in our own times. Too often church dogmatics has been more a desire for power and control rather than of spiritual enlightenment and relational truth. As Dr Kevin Giles (a friend of this parish) has pointed out, subordinationism, or hierarchy in the Trinity, continues to be taught in the church today and is used as a justification for the subordination of women to men in what is called ‘complementarianism’.

Unsurprisingly, corruptions of theology have often been used to justify political and social policies. This was the case with slavery and apartheid, as it also was with feudalism and class. The third verse of the song ‘All things bright and beautiful’ demonstrates it:

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

We need to remember that, like good science, theology is a ‘work in progress’; it is not always true and can sometimes be ungodly. A good theological doctrine remains a ‘best explanation of a complex reality’ that stands until a better explanation or correction arises.

In this respect, theology is a human construct that forms part of our collected memory (or tradition), and which can change and grow over time. We should therefore approach it with humility and an inquiring mind, rather than from a position of superiority, pig-headedness, and exceptionalism.

St Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth:

“Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13: 11-13)

A Problem with Humanity

The idea of Trinity is in part about God, but it is also about humanity. The Bible narrative tells both the story of God and the story of human beings, who are created in the image of God. The Book Genesis tells of God's creation of the world, including people through represented by Adam and Eve, who were given authority to look after that part of the creation in which they lived.

The story goes on to describe Adam and Eve gaining knowledge of good and evil, by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. The result of this was moral agency, or the capacity to choose to do good or evil. The Scriptures then go on to describe the consequences of living with this choice and the inability of humans to overcome wrongdoing and brokenness. This becomes the problem of humanity – created in the image of God, but flawed and broken because of choice, which usually leads to selfishness.

All of this changed when God entered the world as a human in the person of Jesus. He taught about God's intension for the world and people, but he was ultimately rejected and killed. In response, God raised him to new life as a sign of the nature of God's Kingdom – a place where death does not reign. This was what was intended for Adam and Eve in the Garden, but it was lost.

Jesus remains the model for what it is to be a human being filled with God's presence, a model of what the *image of God* in humanity is meant to look like. Nevertheless, Jesus left this world to return to God, but the Holy Spirit (indeed, the Spirit of Jesus himself) entered humanity to bring people into a relationship with God, such as Jesus taught his disciples. We, his followers, have therefore become Christ to the world today, continuing his work of discipleship.

This three-part story of creation, redemption, and returning to a living relationship with God is Trinitarian. It is how we have come to understand the nature of God, but it is also how we have come to understand ourselves – both spiritual and physical beings in a process of transformation that leads us to God.

Do not put your faith in emperors, institutions, or self-centredness. A life of goodness, godliness, and peace is to be discovered through shaping our lives on the Trinitarian God, who creates, transforms and empowers us to become the people we are meant to be – that is, through living lives of creativity, wholeness and love.