

Trinity Sunday

One of the great debates is that between science and religion; between people of faith and of no faith on whether or not one can reconcile faith in the divine being - unknowable and unseen, and the scientific world of discovery we live in. The perceived gulf between science and religion is well illustrated by the claim made by Archbishop Ussher in the 17th century when he calculated the time and date of the beginning of creation. Working back from the birth of Jesus through the Old Testament, Ussher estimated the time and date of creation as "the entrance of the night preceding the 23rd day of October... the year before Christ 4004"¹. Alas for Bishop Ussher, this date has well and truly been debunked by modern science, especially the "Big Bang" theory, which by general agreement calculates creation beginning in a moment of singularity some 13.7 billion years ago.

The gulf twixt science and religion widened somewhat in the 19th century when the naturalist Charles Darwin published his book, "On the Origin of Species," which argued the case for the natural selection of creation over time - a view still challenged by Christians who are inclined to a more literalist understanding of the story of creation in the Book of Genesis.

What is often lost in the struggle to equate science and religion is once they were indistinguishable; many of the great scientific discoveries we take for granted emerged from the church, particularly during the monastic period of the High Middle Ages. And no more do we experience the confluence of science and religion than in the concept of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which we celebrate on the Sunday after Pentecost.

Science and religion notwithstanding, it is by faith that we proclaim the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each Sunday in the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is a theological construct, a compromise worked out in the early part of the 4th century, to reconcile the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human. But behind the declaration of the Trinity as articulated in the Nicene Creed, and the Apostles Creed, is the human experience of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. In other words, how we, in our own lives, experience God as creator, Jesus as redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as that divine breath which inspires, comforts, and empowers us. In other words, I would suggest that it is in the intersection between science and religion that we truly experience the Trinity.

Let me offer a couple of examples. Almost thirty years ago I took a course in astronomy. I was somewhat nervous that working my way through the science of the cosmos might shake my belief in God. In fact, the opposite occurred. The sheer wonder of studying *the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses*² moved me beyond words and deepened my faith in a God of creation and of mystery.

And each Sunday, as I drive to church, I am reminded of the Trinity. I don't know if you have ever noticed that Harrisburg Pike is more or less aligned north and south. Around this time of year, as I drive to St. Edward's each Sunday morning, I witness the sun rising in the east - more or less in line with my left shoulder. But as the summer progresses into autumn the sunrise moves slowly to the south, so that by winter it is almost in my eyes. This visible movement of earth and sun reminds me of the God of creation, and much as science and astronomy can describe the math of it all, it is still a mystery to me how God chose this sun and this planet on which to work God's wonders.

¹ qt. Wikipedia, Ussher

² Eucharist Prayer C, The Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p 370

Whenever I make a hospital visit, I experience the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - God who created us in God's image, and through the ministry of doctors and nurses and hospital staff, and the whole science of medicine which supports them, God is constantly creating; I think of the Son, of Jesus our Lord, who is ever present in times of crisis and times of healing; and I think of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the advocated which stands with us and in us, and the breath of God that enfolds us, giving comfort - the Trinity, God creator, Christ redeemer, Spirit, Holy comforter, an ever present strength in time of trouble.

If only we could accept it, the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a mystery, a complex mystery, just as science is a complex mystery. Modern humanity seems so uncomfortable with mystery - we want to know everything. But the Trinity is a mystery which unfolds before our eyes, just as science is a mystery that unfolds before our eyes. All the more reason not to struggle to understand it, but rather to allow ourselves to fall into the Trinity of God creator, God redeemer, God sanctifier.

That wonderful observer of things spiritual, Frederick Buechner, writes of the Trinity this way: *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us and the mystery within us are all the same mystery... the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God. The Trinity is also a way of saying something about God and the way... God does not need the Creation in order to have something to love because within [God's self] love happens...*³ The theoretical physicist John Polkinghorne, Fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge in England, and an Anglican priest, writes of Science as the "strategy of grounding our understanding in interpreted experience"⁴. He goes on to suggest that each Sunday we interpret the Trinity in the Eucharist, where we encounter the invisible risen Christ. In the Eucharist we give thanks to God for creation; we remember the Cross of Christ; and we encounter the Holy Spirit. In other words, whether through science or faith, the Trinity is how we experience God's love. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, (N.Y. HarperOne, 1993; qt *Synthesis*, Trinity Sunday.

⁴ "Science and the Trinity: the Christian Encounter with Reality", John Polkinghorne, Yale University Press, 2004, xvi.