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The Living God

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1. The Living God

The doctrine of the Trinity, which puts the Christian view of God in a brief formula, can lay claim to being the most important of all Christian beliefs. This chapter will attempt to make clear why this is so.

The chapter has two main parts. The first sketches the historical development of the doctrine and provides a brief outline of it in its classic form. The second explains part of the relevance of the doctrine to Christian belief and practice.

2. The history of the doctrine

Scripture does not talk about three persons in one God. But it does talk about Father, Son and Spirit in such a way that the development of some sort of trinitarian view of God was inevitable. By a 'trinitarian view of God' I mean a way of thinking that regards not only the Father but also the Son and the Spirit as being in some way or other part of the divine side of things and as having distinct roles to play in humanity's creation and salvation. In this section I will trace the broad outlines of that development, from its emergence in apostolic times to its consolidation in a fifth-century creed.

It is especially in those parts of the New Testament that speak about the risen Lord that we see a trinitarian view of God developing. Let me mention just some of the texts illustrating this.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17, written barely twenty years after Jesus' death, we find Paul associating all three with the divine work of our salvation. A few years later we find in Galatians 4:6 an even more developed trinitarian mentality. Here we see all three people helping to share in the Son's relationship with the Father. Moreover, the Spirit – God's Spirit – is clearly described as Jesus' Spirit. This is a further way of associating Jesus with the divine. But it also reinforces the idea that there is a distinction between the Spirit and God (that is, between the Spirit and the Father) that was not really envisaged in Israelite religion as described in the Hebrew Bible.

Moving on to a slighter later period, we find in Ephesians 4:3–6 a text that stresses their contribution to the church's unity and therefore their own unity with each other, an idea that surfaces again in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6. Further examples of 'trinitarian' texts can be found in 2 Corinthians 1:21–22, 3:3 and 13:14. The last is particularly interesting because it is evidence of the three coming to be named together in liturgical formulae that will be used over and over again.

The above texts (and others such as 1 Peter 1:2, Jude 20:21, Revelation 1:4–5 and Hebrews 6:4) all come from sources that concentrate on the life of the infant church after Pentecost. However, examples can also be taken from the gospels. Jesus' baptism, clearly a key revelatory event for the early Christians, is one such example (see Matthew 3:13–17 and parallel texts). Let me close this section by referring to two others.

The first is from the gospel of John, 15:26–16:15, where Jesus speaks of his relationship to the Father and to the Spirit. It is a text that not only underscores the close unity Jesus has with the Father, but also elucidates the respective relationships between all three. The Father is the source of all, the One who sends not only the Spirit but also the Son. The Father gives all he has to the Son, including the Spirit. The Son therefore can also send the Spirit and does so. Moreover, since whatever the Father has belongs to the Son, whatever the Spirit brings is derived from the Son.

The second text is from Matthew's gospel – 28:19 – and is, by common consent, the high point of the development of a trinitarian mentality in apostolic times. It is also a formula that has entered into the church's baptismal liturgy. In this text, written probably as late as AD 85, the three are named alongside each other as though all were equal, the only differentiation being their ordering.

In early post-apostolic times the custom continues of associating Father, Son and Spirit with each other in the way we have just seen. Barely fifty years after the end of the apostolic period (c. 155) we can see the outlines of a formula developing that will become customary in the church: 'to the Father … through the Son … and the Holy Spirit' (see, for example, Justin Martyr's Apology I, 65). And only twenty years later (c. 180), we find Theophilus of Antioch describing the three as a 'triad', that is to say a 'threesome'. The term 'triad' did not enter into Western theological thought. But a similar term coined about sixty years later by the African scholar Tertullian did – 'Trinity'.

Tertullian also coined the phrase 'three persons in one substance', to bring out the fact that the distinction of persons did not imply dividing the divine substance between them. God was one in substance but three in the way in which that substance was shared. About a century

later, theologians from the East came up with a similar formula: 'three hypostases in one substance'. It was coined by a group of theologians known as the Cappadocians, since they were all born in Cappadocia. The basic idea behind both formulae was that the one, undivided Godhead was shared in three different ways.

In the fifth century in the West, a creed was composed that spelt out all the implications of the formula. It also highlighted the core Christian beliefs that necessitated some such formula: Father, Son and Spirit are distinct realities and each fully God. Nevertheless, there is only one God. The creed is known as the *Quicumque*, after its opening word, and also as the Athanasian Creed, after Athanasius, who was at one time wrongly believed to have been its author.

It should be clear by now that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity has its roots in Scripture and is not, as some have tried to argue, derived from pagan polytheistic or philosophical ideas. However, philosophical ideas provided early Christian thinkers with tools for trying to understand how a single divine substance could be shared by three without being divided. We turn, then, to some of those ideas and the models built with them.

The Apologists tried to use Stoic ideas about *logos* to understand the relationship between Jesus and the Father, especially to explain how they could be part of one undivided divinity and yet distinct from each other. *Logos* means 'reason' or 'word'. The Stoics distinguished between the 'immanent *logos*' and the 'expressed *logos*'. The former is reason in an inactivated state, while the latter is its activated expression. Applied to God, the divine *logos* was merely immanent within the Godhead until the moment of creation, when it became activated, a *logos* expressed in the order and harmony in the world.

Prior to creation, the Apologists argued, the Son was only immanent – that is, not clearly formed – within the Godhead. With creation, however, the Son sprang forth within the divinity as an idea springs forth within our minds, thereby becoming the 'expressed *logos*'. There were now two clearly distinct realities within God: the thinker (the Father) and the expressed thought (the Son).

As can be seen, the basic idea here is to compare the Son to an idea springing forth from the mind of God. This way of picturing the relationship between Father and Son became part of classic Western trinitarian theology, as a result especially of Augustine's 'psychological model'. It was an attractive model precisely because Scripture itself refers to the Son as the *logos* or 'word' of God, with God from the beginning, expressing the mind of God perfectly (John 1:1–14). The Apologists' version of it had for many the drawback that it seemed to deny the eternity

of the Son's existence – since the Son springs forth clearly only at creation. But the model itself was to remain. As regards the Spirit, this was seen as some sort of effluence flowing from God. However, the Apologists had no intellectual model within which to place the Spirit.

Later in the same century we find Irenaeus of Lyons extending the Apologists' model to the emergence of the Spirit too. He does so by distinguishing within God the capacity for reason (God's latent Word) and the capacity for spiritual activity (God's latent Wisdom). At the moment of creation and redemption these latent capacities are activated, and in their activated, expressed form are known as the Son and the Spirit respectively. Thus activated, they can be compared to 'hands' used by the Father for our creation and redemption.

Writing in the third century, Tertullian also used the Stoic idea of the emergence of the *logos* from an immanent to an expressed state in order to explain how the Son could be both divine and yet distinct from the Father. However, he also used other models or images, all of which bring out a further point, namely the relationship between Son and Spirit. For he uses images that evoke the idea of a process beginning with the Father, moving through the Son and ending up in the Holy Spirit: a fruit derived from a shoot which in tum grows from the root; a channel of water drawn from a river whose source is a spring; a point of light at the end of a beam that originates in the sun.

Origen lived at the same time as Tertullian but was an Eastern thinker. The model used by him was drawn from the emerging Neoplatonic philosophy of the time. The overarching idea is that goodness has a built-in drive to share itself. This impulse to share moves the original, undifferentiated, divine One to produce Mind. From Mind there emerges Soul. Soul has two levels, a higher and a lower level. From the latter, matter is produced. Origen fitted his trinitarian thought into this scheme. The Father is identified with the One. To produce the world, he first produces Mind, the Son. And just as Soul flows from Mind, so too the Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son – a point Tertullian made in another way.

As we saw, the Cappadocians bequeathed to the East the formula 'three hypostases in one substance'. Moreover, they distinguished between them as follows: a *hypostasis* is a particular way in which a substance exists. The difference between the two is therefore the difference between the particular (*hypostasis*) and the general (substance). Father, Son and Spirit are portrayed as three particular ways in which one and the same divine substance exist. To illustrate the difference between the general and the particular, Basil of Caesarea appealed to the example of humanity shared by several individuals. We all share fully in the substance known

as 'humanity', but we are all different realisations of it. We are all human beings. But we are all different ways of being human.

Of course, this is only an analogy. If it were applied to God too literally, one would end up with three gods. But it does illustrate the basic point the Fathers were trying to make, namely that one and the same divine substance can have three different and quite distinct (though not separate) ways of existing simultaneously. To make the same point more crudely: the one undivided Godhead exists simultaneously in three different 'shapes' -as Father, Son and Spirit.

The Cappadocian model, therefore, is of a single substance having three different and yet simultaneous ways of existing. What differentiates each way from the others is either the fact that it is the original, underived way (the Father) or it is one of the two ways in which it is derived from that original position (Son and Spirit). The more accurate model, then, is as follows: a single undivided substance, existing simultaneously in three different ways, each of which is unceasingly flowing either into or out of the others. The flow is known as the divine *perichoresis* or *circumincessio.*

In trying to deepen his understanding of the Trinity, Augustine took as his starting point the fact that, according to the Scriptures, humanity has been made in God's image and likeness. The best place to look for a model or image of the Trinity, therefore, is within ourselves, at our spiritual natures. In pursuing this line of thought, he developed several 'psychological models' (as they came to be called) of the Trinity. The main ones all revolve around the capacity of the human mind to know and love.

The aspects of the mind that Augustine eventually singled out were the following: its ability to be aware of itself (which he called 'memory'), to understand itself (which he called 'understanding'), and to love itself ('love'). Here, we have an undivided spiritual reality (the human mind) that can exist in three distinct but related forms: self-awareness, self-understanding and self-love. This provides us with a model of a God whose self-awareness (Father) giving rise to self-understanding (Son) is completed in an act of self-love (Holy Spirit).

The earliest models began by focusing on the divine mind. Augustine balanced this out by bringing in the divine capacity to love. In the twelfth century we see Richard of St Victor moving to the other extreme and focusing exclusively on love. In doing so, he gave rise to what has been called the 'family model' of the Trinity, because it pictures the love of two persons for each other producing a third, almost as an offspring.

Richard's starting point is the idea that God will automatically love in the fullest possible way. God's initial drive to love results in the following structure within the Godhead: a love that is given freely ('gratuitous love')

and a love that is received ('indebted love'). However, love shared only by two is not yet perfect, since perfect love leads lovers to tum away from each other so as to share their love with a third. Hence gratuitous and indebted love – Father and Son – produce what Richard calls a 'co-beloved'. Love in this third form is the Holy Spirit. It is a love that is *purely* received, since it issues in no further forms of love.

The Scriptures provide not only the basic raw material from which some such doctrine as the Trinity had to emerge but also a clear indication of the relationship that existed among the three. The Father always appears as the source of both the Son and the Spirit, as the one who sends the Son and sends the Spirit. As regards the relationship between the Son and the Spirit, the Spirit is repeatedly referred to as the Spirit of the Son and not vice versa: the Son, too, sends the Spirit but the Spirit is never spoken of as sending the Son.

Hence, Christian thinkers always spoke of the Son as proceeding – that is, coming – from the Father. As regards the Spirit, however, a dispute arose between East and West that was to become a major point of division between them. The West believed that the Spirit's dependence on the Son could only be due to the fact that the Spirit proceeds or flows from not only the Father but also the Son. This is the doctrine known as the *filioque*, a Latin word meaning 'and from the Son'. The Greeks, on the other hand, believed that the Spirit flows only from the Father, even though the Son has a role in giving the Spirit to us and even in shaping the Spirit's identity. The dispute continues to this day.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the typically Western theology of the Trinity was more or less complete. Indeed, its basic outlines had already been shaped as early as the sixth century. This is therefore a useful place to pause and summarise the main elements of that theology.

The classic formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is that there are three 'persons' in one undivided God. Each of the 'persons' is fully divine, none is 'more' God than any of the others. This means that a distinction must be made between 'person' and 'nature'. 'Nature' refers to the one undivided divine substance. 'Person' refers to the way in which that undivided substance is shared or, more accurately, to a particular way in which it exists. As used here, therefore, 'person' is a term that does not refer (as we normally do) to someone who has his or her own separate nature, mind and will. On the contrary, the divine three share fully one undivided nature, one undivided mind, one undivided will. The *whole* of the divinity – mind, will, consciousness – exists in three inseparable and undivided ways: as the unbegotten origin of all else (the Father); as the begotten expression of all that the Father is (the Son); and as (according

to one stream of thought) the bond of love between Father and Son, or (according to another stream of thought), the result of a single act of love on their part.

The three unique ways in which the divine nature exists or (as it is technically put) 'subsists' are derived from a process within the divinity that sets up a relationship between each of them. It is this relationship that distinguishes Father, Son and Spirit from each other. Indeed, it is this relationship that creates their very identity. Thus the Father *is* the divine nature existing as source of the Son, while the Son *is* the divine nature existing as flowing from the Father as the Father's image. The Spirit (in Western theology) *is* the divine nature existing as a love that flows from both Father and Son.

The term 'procession' here simply means the coming forth of one divine person from another. Christian tradition – both East and West – has always distinguished two processions. The first is the procession of the Son from the Father. The second is the procession of the Spirit, which in Western theology is from Father *and* Son.

The term 'procession' itself is a biblical term. It is used of the Holy Spirit's coming forth from the Father in John 15:26. Although it was originally applied only to the Holy Spirit, it came to be used in Western theology as a generic term referring to the coming forth of both Son and Spirit. Other terms were used for distinguishing between them – the Son's procession was called 'generation', the Spirit's 'spiration'.

As noted above, the Son proceeds from the Father. That, and that alone, is what is demanded by Christian orthodoxy. However, the West developed a speculative explanation of the Son's procession, one that connected it with God's mind. As refined by Thomas Aquinas, the Son proceeds from the Father's intellect, as a mental image proceeds from our intellect. This idea also meshed very well with biblical references to the Son as the 'Word' of God (John 1:1ff.), the 'image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15) and 'Wisdom' (see 1 Cor. 1:24). 'Word' and 'Wisdom' evoke ideas of a mind at work, and 'Word' also evokes the idea of the creation of a mental image.

As regards the Spirit, the West saw the Spirit as proceeding from an act of the divine will as possessed by Father and Son. The Spirit proceeded as the love or result of the love that flowed from Father and Son.

This way of understanding the divine processions was also very attractive because it seemed to make so much sense. God is a spirit, and a spirit has two basic activities: knowing and willing. That the Son should be spoken of in Scripture as the image or Word of the Father, while the Spirit is connected with divine action or love, seems to be well explained if one

sees the former as proceeding from the divine mind and the latter from the divine will.

Since the divine persons share a single nature, they are said to 'be in' or to 'flow into' each other. This is referred to as the divine *perichoresis* (a Greek term) or, to use its Latin equivalent, *circumincessio*. The rational grounding of this doctrine is simply the fact that they share one nature. However, a biblical ground was also found in Jesus' words in John 10:38.

Precisely because all that distinguishes the divine persons from each other is their mutual relationships, everything else is held by them in common. Hence, every divine action which has an effect beyond the borders of the divinity (*ad extra divinitatem*) is performed by all three acting in unison. This is a sound principle. However, it came to be distorted in Western theology by saying that one could not really distinguish the Father's contribution from that of the Son (apart from the Son's taking on a human nature), or either's contribution from that of the Spirit. Modern theologies of the Trinity have corrected this distortion.

We can now look back and see that what has developed is not simply a particular theology but a Christian *dogma*. In other words, the Trinity has become an unquestioned part of the faith of the church. The doctrine therefore has the merit of presenting a clear expression of what Christians believed were the full implications of the relevant biblical data.

On the negative side, however, we have witnessed the price paid for that clarity: the isolation of the doctrine from its roots in the involvement of Father, Son and Spirit in our salvation. Trinitarian theology had become exclusively a theology of the 'immanent' Trinity – that is, the Trinity considered solely as an inner divine reality, where all the attention is focused on the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit and on the problem of maintaining both their distinction and the divine unity. This 'immanent Trinity' became divorced from the 'economic' Trinity, which is the Trinity as involved in the 'economy' of salvation. Not surprisingly, the Trinity ceased to have any practical relevance for Christians. It contributed nothing to their experience of salvation and did not enter in any meaningful way into their prayer life. It functioned mainly as the supreme 'mystery' of their faith.

In the twentieth century, theologians have come to stress again the unity of the economic and immanent trinities. Perhaps the most renowned of the attempts to do so is that of the German theologian Karl Rahner, who loved to say that the immanent Trinity is the economic trinity and vice versa. Let us now see what a theology of the Trinity looks like that takes this principle seriously.

3. Taking God's incarnation seriously: the Trinity as a divine-human reality

As far as we are concerned, the only 'inner divine life' we know of is the relationship between the Father, the man Jesus Christ and the Spirit binding them to each other. Even if one believes that there was an inner life within God before Jesus appeared on this earth, Jesus' coming has changed that inner life forever. For Jesus' coming means that God no longer has any life that is unrelated to human beings. The Son is and remains for all eternity both a human being and part of God's own very being. The Spirit flows for all eternity from both the Father and a human being (if one subscribes to the Western *filioque*). In short, there is no such thing as a Trinity apart from humanity. What God's inner life would have looked like apart from the man Jesus of Nazareth is of no interest or relevance to us. For the fact is that the only Trinity Christians know of is one in which a human being – Jesus – is one of its members.

This is the deep truth embedded in Rahner's insistence that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and vice versa. God's own trinitarian life is an incarnate form of life. When the Word became flesh, what became incarnate was not simply a single person but a network of divine relationships. All this implies that God's inner life became something visible, something that was seen by people.

To appreciate this point, let us dwell for a moment on Jesus' baptism. There we see the Father proclaiming Jesus to be his beloved Son, and his Spirit descending on Jesus. But what we are witnessing is not simply the relationship between a human being and God, but God's own inner life exposed, made visible. We are witnessing an event taking place within the divinity. Moreover, that incident enables us to understand that the rest of Jesus' life was a life being lived within the divinity. The rest of Jesus' life was the living out of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. The rest of Jesus' life was the living out of God's own love life.

But that is still not all. When we think of Jesus' life as the living out of God's own love life we must not look simply at Jesus' relationship with his Father and his possession of the Spirit. For Jesus stands before his Father not simply as a divine person unrelated to anything outside of the divinity but rather as a human being who has a mother, a foster-father, close relatives, distant relatives, friends, a nation – an entire world filled with joys and sorrows. All of these other links are part of his and therefore part of God's own love life. Granted, they can never be part of God in the same sense as Jesus is. But to the extent that they are part of Jesus' world, they are also part of God's world. They are a visible part of God's inner life.

God became part of humanity's world so that we can become part of God's world. The doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine that God is a community, a community of Father, Son and Spirit. Humanity, created as it is in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27), is also a community. God's plan was not that the two communities should each have their own group area but rather that they should be fully integrated. That was why the Word became flesh and the divine Spirit of love was poured out on all at Pentecost.

The idea that our life is part of God's inner life and vice versa is central to Christianity. It is the whole point of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is summed up in that famous text from 2 Peter 1:4: 'Do you not know that you are sharers in the divine nature?' In time this came to mean in both East and West that somehow or other our own being was transformed by God's presence, just as iron glows when placed in a fire. However, the fuller biblical picture is that we share in God's love life. We become, in a real sense, part of the Trinity. For the Father becomes *our* father, the Spirit of love *our* Spirit of love, binding us all to each other.

The church is meant to be the place where we can see and experience this divine–human community taking shape down the ages. For it is only in the church that we have a community of people who publicly proclaim Christ as their brother, the Father as their father and the Spirit as the love binding them to each other. The church is called to *be* something before *doing* something: to be the visible embodiment through the ages of the ongoing life of the economic Trinity.

But even in the church this divine–human community is only a shadow of what it is meant to be. It can become fully what it is meant to be only by going through the same process of death and resurrection that Jesus did. Only then will we be freed not simply from all sinful influences but also from the limitations of space and time, as we experience them. Only then will our humanity be so transformed that at last we will be able to be 'inside' each other as Father and Son are. Only then will we be able to be present to each other in the Spirit a Father and Son who are present to us now. Only then will we share as fully as a creature can in the Trinity's *perichoresis*, the unending flowing into and out of each other.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus clearly affects the way in which we view salvation. In the past salvation was viewed individualistically. That is to say, all the emphasis was on the individual's relationship with God, and with a God viewed pretty much as a single individual. However, if God is a community of Father, Son and Spirit, then salvation implies being inserted into the life of a community. To be saved means not simply having one's personal sins forgiven or getting into heaven but rather to share in the life of a community.

Moreover, if this community is not simply a divine community but a divine–human community, then to be saved is to be made part of a family that includes not only Father, Son and Spirit, but also neighbour. Love of God and love of neighbour are not merely inseparable. They are part and parcel of one and the same love, for the love that binds all the members of this divine–human community to each other is formed within them by the Love that is the Holy Spirit. Hence, building up human community can be part and parcel of the very experience of salvation. When we reach out to the poor, the lonely, the oppressed and treat them for what they are, namely our brothers and sisters, we are enabling them to experience not simply human love and caring, but also what it means to share in God's own community life. We are enabling them to experience an important dimension of salvation.

It has become somewhat fashionable in theological writings to argue that a trinitarian model of God pushes one in the direction of democratic, egalitarian structures, while viewing God as a single person (called the 'monarchical' model, viewing God as a monarch) pushes one in the direction of authoritarian, hierarchical structures. The general drift of the argument is that to conceive of God as a single person, Lord of the universe, is to have a model that legitimates autocratic structures in both church and state – Pope and king. Conversely, to conceive of God as a community of co-equal persons is to have a model that demands democratic, egalitarian structures – a congregational one in church affairs and a socialist one in the political realm.

A good deal of confused thinking occurs here, for the truth is that both monarchical and trinitarian models of God can support democratic and undemocratic structures. One must not forget that it was ancient Israel's very monarchical view of God that was the inspiration behind its originally federalist and egalitarian social structures. Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity is not simply the doctrine that there are three co-equal persons in one God. It also asserts that there is a definite order among the persons – the Father comes first, whom the Son obeys in all things, and the Spirit witnesses to the Son and not to himself.

What is far more important than the mere structure of our model – monarchical or trinitarian – is the way God acts, especially in relation to human beings. And it is here that the doctrine of the Trinity has an undeniable advantage as a theological basis for reflecting on social structures, for the Trinity teaches us that God is structured along the lines of a self-emptying love. The Father shares everything with the Son, who gives himself totally to the Father (John 5:19ff). The Spirit is the love that

turns that ceaseless flow from Father to Son and back into something more than merely physically sharing a divine 'substance'.

If God is structured like that, then our ecclesiastical and political structures must reflect self-emptying, mutual service, love and, above all, sharing, for the real value of the Trinity as a socio-political model is to be found in the total sharing that is the very foundation for the distinction between the divine persons.

Since, in our sinful world, monarchical structures usually tend to block this idea of sharing and entrench the privileges of those in authoritarian positions, a more democratic, indeed socialist-type, structure would seem to reflect more easily the God that Christians believe in. However, whether that is so in a particular situation will depend very much on that situation. What is crucial is that Christians should oppose any social structures that work against rather than for a social climate in which the emphasis is on mutual belonging, service and sharing. If humanity's destiny is to be as one with each other ('inside' each other!) as Father and Son are, then any church or state structure that reflects that ideal, however dimly, is to be supported. On the other hand, structures that entrench radically contradictory ideals (apartheid or self-aggrandisement at the expense of others, for example) are to be opposed.

Church structures, in particular, should be subjected to piercing criticism by Christians. It is very difficult for Christians to point convincing fingers at inadequate or sinful political or economic structures if the way they structure their own togetherness in Christ reflects more of a concern for power, domination and self-centredness than the Trinity, whose life they are telling the world they share.

Finally, I would like to say something about integrating the doctrine of the Trinity into the way we practise our Christianity. Let me begin with prayer. Many Christians pray to God as though the doctrine of the Trinity did not exist. They address their prayers simply to 'God', without reflecting on which of the divine persons they are talking to.

If we take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously, it will mean becoming conscious of the persons in our prayer life. Moreover, it will mean becoming conscious of the different relationship we have with each of them. To make a conscious effort to alter our prayer habits so that we relate in a different way to Father, Son and Spirit will make the Trinity come alive for us. One will actually begin the process of living one's incorporation into God's own communal life.

Taking the Trinity seriously also means taking seriously the fact that other human beings are our brothers and sisters. It means trying to transfer some of the family feelings we have for our own blood brothers

and sisters to the wider community. I say 'some of the family feelings' because it should be obvious that it is physically impossible to relate to a large group of human beings in exactly the same way one can relate to the smaller group of one's own blood relatives. Moreover, it is only in the small group that one is able to learn the skills of loving and accepting that are so important for the stability of the larger group. However, taking seriously our insertion into the life of the Trinity means taking seriously the fact that experiencing our earthly parents and siblings is meant to be the beginning of a broader and deeper experience. This is the experience that the whole of humanity is – as intended by God – a single family in which all are brothers and sisters of each other, sharing a Love that flows out of and back to our common divine parent through our brother, Jesus Christ.

The two families – our own and that of wider humanity – are not meant to be opposed. The one should feed into and support the other. However, should they clash, one cannot without further ado choose one's blood family. The needs of the wider one could well demand that in a case of irreducible conflict we choose it. This was why Jesus said that a consequence of his coming could well be that family members are set over against each other (Matt. 10:34). This was why he said that we had to love him more than father, mother, brother, sister (Matt. 10:37ff). This was why he himself made it clear that his own brothers and sisters were far broader than the narrow circle of those who came to call him on a particular occasion (Matt. 12:50).

Our world is one in which systems such as apartheid are roundly condemned. But it is still a world in which national interests are regarded as being so important that they attempt to demand all our loyalty. Indeed, national interests are repeatedly appealed to in order to block moves that would lead to a more just international system. The United Nations does provide some forum for counteracting this tendency. But the time still has to come when Christians allow the doctrine of the Trinity to cast a sufficiently critical light on nationalism so as to condemn many of its forms with all the ferocity with which apartheid was condemned. For much of contemporary nationalism is really just apartheid with large and dressed up in an acceptable way.

Part of a Christian's spirituality, therefore, is to see not only the family but also the nation-state as but a sign of a larger reality. And it is this larger reality, the establishment of a divine-human community, that operates as a final, absolute yardstick against which all lesser loyalties must be measured. Family loyalties and national loyalties do indeed have their place, an extremely important place. Without them we cannot grow in the experience of loving and sharing. However, they are but

embodiments of a larger reality and it is the larger, trinitarian reality that is of ultimate importance.

Note that I said that it is the larger, trinitarian reality that is of ultimate importance – and not simply that it is God, the Trinity, that is of ultimate importance. The reason is, once again, that we cannot separate the immanent and economic trinities. Humanity is part of God's inner life, for Jesus was and remains forever a human being. And by the same token, God is part of humanity's life. This means that we cannot separate God and humanity and say that the former is of ultimate significance while the latter has only relative value. Belief in the economic Trinity means that we can no longer separate the two. Certainly it is possible to separate individual human beings from the economic Trinity and from the broader divine-human community centred on the economic Trinity. The doctrine of hell is the doctrine that this awful possibility exists. But it is not possible to separate the human from the divine and give ultimate significance only to the latter.

This is why Jesus regarded love of neighbour and love of God as being inextricably linked, so much so that one could say that they are of equal importance (Matt 22:38–39). It is why he was able to say that God's sabbath Sunday! – was established for humanity's needs (Mark 2:27). The doctrine of the Trinity means that love of neighbour, too, has ultimate significance.

With that we have come to the end of this brief survey of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity. As can be seen, it is a doctrine that the infinite reality called 'God' is a community. It is a doctrine that this God has created the community of humanity for the purpose of sharing in that inner divine life. It is a doctrine that points us to the basic values necessary for sharing in it: self-emptying, even to the point of the Cross. It is a doctrine that tells us that God and humanity cannot be separated, with absolute value being given to the former and relative value to the latter. Rather it teaches us that the two have become so completely one that the best image for what the future holds in store for us is that we will be 'inside' each other – as Father, Son and Spirit are.