The Trinity

Sermon at Trinity College Chapel on Trinity Sunday, 26 May 2013

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This is how many sermons begin: with an invocation of God as triune or as Trinity. But this seems also all there is to it. As frequently as the Trinity gets mentioned at the outset of sermons, as rarely is it referred to later on. And this is certainly not merely true for sermons. The Trinity, it appears, has largely disappeared from our world; not only those who explicitly reject it as a nonsensical concept but many or most believers, including many priests and theologians, find they have little to say about it. It lingers on merely in a number of formulaic references, in liturgical or creedal texts or indeed in titles and names that hail from a time when reference to the 'holy and undivided Trinity' was apparently deemed meaningful and indispensable. But they can easily be understood as what the great anthropologist E.B. Tylor called 'survivals' remnants in present culture of an earlier period which, however, have now lost their original frame of reference and indeed their onetime function.

Scarcity of references to God as Trinity in today's world should not, however, obscure the bigger picture of which this is merely one part. God himself seems to have largely exited from our language. By this I do not mean, of course, that nobody today is religious or believes in God. On the contrary, as recent debates about the so-called new atheism have shown religious belief continues to be a highly controversial topic in our early-21st century societies. While it has its detractors, it equally has its defenders, and the number of those who stand by the sidelines, bemused and undecided, somehow attracted and yet unconvinced, is probably the majority. And yet nothing is perhaps as characteristic of our current religious situation as the fact that God is no longer a word that comes easily even to the vast majority of believers. Looking beyond very specific

contexts, such as Sunday worship or, if you wish, academic theology, it has become exceedingly rare that people, even and particularly people of faith, speak of God when they talk about themselves and of the world. God, it appears, has in many ways ceased to be a word available to us in most of our everyday language – and this applies to nonbelievers and believers alike.

In fact, this has given to many recent debates about God and God's existence a somewhat artificial and sterile character. I, and I suspect many believers, felt that what was at issue in these discussions was only tangentially if at all related to the things that matter for our faith. God's existence was skilfully challenged or defended but the object of these arguments seemed to have little or no significance for any living person today or, at least, such significance remained rather unclear.

This is, I think, because language about God, where it works, is not primarily predicated on the hypothesis that some obscure object exists but it qualifies the way we think and speak about (and interact with) ourselves and the world around us. Invoking God, we might say, adds a dimension to our perception of reality and, if it works, this added dimension makes us better and, ultimately, happier.

I don't know whether any of you watched, live or on video, the debate in the Sheldonian between Richard Dawkins and Rowan Williams, moderated by Anthony Kenny. Williams, very wisely I thought, sought to move the discussion away from a simple battle over arguments for or against the existence of God and focussed instead on the way language about God is embedded in the human constitution which, he argued, was much impoverished if the dimension God gives to our lives is removed.

Yet Williams's own contribution to that debate also served as an illustration of the problems that beset language about God in today's world. Throughout the debate he seemed at his best when avoiding the word 'God', explaining the significance of religious and theistic belief with a plethora of alternative concepts, metaphors, and

theories. An unkind observer might deduce from this that even the church's highest representatives today convey their message more easily without using the word God.

More likely though is it that the then Archbishop of Canterbury realised the need today to learn anew the meaning and the right use of the word God. That the rejection it faces bespeaks its facile and misleading use by many who profess to be believers but have allowed language about God to become severed from their deepest experiences as human beings. This, to be sure, happens easily enough. The word 'God' is a treacherous vocabulary – with its three letters and a single syllable it sounds like the most normal even ordinary term denoting an object we can control by naming it (and then use to control others) rather than alerting us to a reality that will inevitably challenge and transform ourselves and our relationship with the world around us.

For this reason, the difficulties with the word God are not confined to our own time; wherever the name of God has been invoked, its abuse was never far away. In fact, it is at this point that we begin to understand the significance of the Trinity for the Christian tradition. Trinitarian language about God was born from the insight early on that to speak or think of God is never an easy or straightforward affair. It was introduced in order to facilitate speaking of God in a good and helpful manner. Belief in the Trinity is therefore not something else, on top of and in addition to, faith in God. Rather, it is the acceptance of a particular mode of speaking about God which, the Christian tradition has maintained, steers clear of at least some of the most problematic misconceptions we have of him. The Trinity matters because it alerts us to the need to be trained in thought and language about God, and because it suggests terms and images that have proved particularly apt for this purpose.

How can we understand that God is both the most comprehensive being—providing answers to the question of where everything came from—and also near and even intimate to every single one of us? How can we comprehend that he acted in the past—through the life of Jesus in particular—and yet is with us today and, in fact, provides the

grounds for our hope in the future? How can we not be puzzled by the recognition that God holds us accountable for the responsibilities we have in our lives and yet also accepts us the way we are, with no strings attached?

The Renaissance philosopher and theologian Nicholas of Cusa sought to express this insight into the seemingly paradoxical nature of God by calling him the coincidence of opposites. The notion of God as Trinity does something similar by embedding language about God into a narrative framework that invokes different images, Father, Son, Spirit, while insisting that they refer to one and the same reality.

God as Father: that is the ground and origin of all being, the creator of the cosmos, the ultimate answer to the question where we come from;

God as Son: that is God within ourselves and within the other, the ultimate criterion of human perfection;

God as Spirit: that is God as the dynamic principle keeping the world and humanity moving towards it eventual fulfilment.

All three are related to dimensions of our humanity which are distinct but not separate and in this way they help us think and speak about God in a way conducive to our religion. If therefore we find today that we need to regain the ability meaningfully to speak of God, we will do well to recover the ideas and images of him as Trinitarian.