

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 30 May 2021
11.00am Rev Peter Cornick

Trinity Sunday

The Trinity: mystery; vulnerability

Isaiah 6: 1-8 & John 3: 1-17

It is Trinity Sunday, so two reflections on the Trinity using both readings: the first, 'mystery' using Isaiah 6: 'In the year that King Uzziah died' ... and the second, 'vulnerability' using John 3, and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night; both following some thoughts by Richard Rohr from his book, *The Divine Dance*.

The Trinity: mystery

The *Ordinands' Testimony Service*, is always a moving and remarkable act of worship. Last Sunday evening, the ministers from the London District, who are to be ordained at this year's Methodist Conference, spoke about their 'calling'. One man admitted to being a bit of a handful for his Sunday School teacher years ago – his first few years as a minister had helped him to see a wider view of worship and the Methodist people. A woman could not believe that God had called her to ordained ministry; she was still surprised. And yet, she had come to realise through the training and her time with her new church, that, inadequate though she may feel, God had indeed called her, and she was grateful. Still another spoke movingly about hearing a call as a younger man – that call being tested and yet not confirmed. Now, many years later, here he was ... on the eve of his ordination.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' Isaiah 6:8

Reading Richard Rohr on the Trinity, he admits to wanting to be like St Francis of Assisi. It was his Spiritual Director who told him, "' You're 'unfortunately' Richard Rohr from Kansas'" which, Rohr says, '*doesn't sound nearly as dramatic or exciting ... Except when I realised: all God wants is Richard from Kansas.*'¹

What struck me about the ordinands from London whilst hearing their testimonies, was the variety of people God calls – male and female, black and white, older and younger. Perhaps there were other elements of diversity I could not obviously see.

But what struck me too, in hearing these testimonies, was that the call to ministry – in this case, ordained ministry – appeared somewhat mysterious; an allusive phenomenon was being spoken about; made up of prayer and conversation, experience on the job and in at least one person, a distinct voice she described as *other than herself*. The mystery of the 'calling' was understood by each, but yet, left them with far more to discover. For each one, ordination is a milestone of significance; yet not one of them would dare suggest he or she had fully understood this mystery of 'calling'; had 'got it'.

Richard Rohr – is writing about the mystery of the Trinity:

¹ Rohr, Richard, *The Divine Dance*, London 2016 p66

'Mystery' he says, 'isn't something that you *cannot* understand – it is something that you can *endlessly understand!*

There is no point at which you can say, "I've got it." Always and forever, the mystery gets *you!*²

Rohr points out that the Trinity 'cannot be known as we know any other object.'³ It is not a word or phrase you will find anywhere in the New Testament. Trinity, first used by Tertullian writing about two centuries after Christ ... Trinity is essentially, mystery.

There have been plenty of attempts to explain this mystery of the Trinity. But the Trinity is in itself, a metaphor, to explain the mystery of God.

So, Father Son and Spirit? Very personal but rather patriarchal. Why not give to each roles – a neat box to be placed in. Creator, redeemer, sanctifier? But this continues to suggest the sanctifier cannot create and the redeemer cannot sanctify. Are we still trying to reduce God to our size. Rohr uses a different three words: the 'Infinite'; the 'Imminent'; the 'Intimate'. Does that help – or is it still an attempt to define the indefinable?

Remember Isaiah's vision of God. He starts off by rooting God's calling to him in a time and place – 'in the year King Uzziah died'. There's the context. We might say, 'in the year the pandemic struck, God spoke to me through a carer.' There's the time and place.

For Isaiah, there follows a vision of something beyond – something of mystery: 'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty.'

But notice, Isaiah quickly draws you back to reality – the place, Jerusalem: 'the hem of his robe filled' – filled what? ... the temple.'

God beyond our imagining: God in our own place. Both in a sense, mystery.

And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah 6:3

To grapple with the Trinity, is to wrestle with mystery. Try to define her, him, them, is impossible. The Trinity is already an attempt to define mystery.

Perhaps better to enter the Trinity through *experiencing* her, him, them. Which is rather what those ordinands were trying to do last Sunday evening – or Richard from Kansas – allowing God to speak through their experience. In their testimonies, I heard the 'Infinite' – Isaiah's 'high and lofty'; I heard the 'Imminent' – 'I live among a people of unclean lips'; I heard the 'Intimate' – 'Here I am, send me.'

Through the experience of those ordinands, I heard the Infinite, Imminent, and Intimate mystery of the Trinity.

² Ibid, p27

³ Ibid p50

The Trinity: vulnerability

I would like you to look at this picture.⁴



It is a picture of Jesus, in the red robe on the right, talking to Nicodemus in the green on the left. They are both depicted as black African men, and sit facing each other, in a small building, bathed in light. Above Jesus' head are some gourds, common to African communities.

The artwork is from the Mafa people of northern Cameroon and Nigeria, and whilst there are western elements to the art – Jesus is the one illuminated by the light – the image is one which celebrates Jesus as a black person.

I would like you to observe the vulnerability of the picture as a key to entering the mystery of the Trinity; it is through vulnerability Rohr suggests, that the Trinity might best be entered into. Historically in the west, the Trinity has been used for control and power – the painting itself challenges this western perception.

It is dark outside – look beyond Jesus' right hand, there is a door opening – inside, light. It is often said that perhaps Nicodemus is afraid to be seen with Jesus in broad daylight. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. The Pharisees see Jesus as a threat to the stability of the Temple;

⁴ JESUS MAFA. Nicodemus, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48385> [retrieved May 28, 2021]. Original source: <http://www.librairie-emmanuel.fr> (contact page: <https://www.librairie-emmanuel.fr/contact>).

somewhat of a maverick. Nicodemus is curious: I know you are a teacher, but how can you perform these signs 'apart from the presence of God?'

Nicodemus begins to ask Trinitarian questions: you appear 'Imminent', but you seem 'Infinite'.

To experience Jesus, to experience the Trinity says Richard Rohr, Nicodemus has to become vulnerable.

Nicodemus looks rather anxious; on the edge of his seat; furtive perhaps; or confused; 'You must be born from above'; 'How can anyone be born again?'

In his questions, this teacher of Israel has to become vulnerable.

Perhaps you notice Jesus admonishing Nicodemus. He hasn't received the testimony. If Jesus, tells him about things on earth, which he can see, and he doesn't believe, what will he believe about heaven — the things he can't see or explain — the 'Intimate' Spirit of Pentecost for example, blowing 'where it chooses'. Are there in this scene, echoes of Thomas, later in John's Gospel? 'Happy are those who believe yet have not seen.' Is Jesus in this conversation teaching Nicodemus ... faith? Belief? Vulnerability?

What about the gourds on a shelf above Jesus' head? What do they symbolise? In African art, they are the gourds which grow and swell; like the growing and swelling of creation; so, in this man, this Son, this Imminent, here too is the Creator; the Infinite. And is that some wheat alongside the gourd? Like wheat in the ground, the Jesus will die before rising again:

the Son of Man [must] be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Do you observe in this conversation, in its warmth, in its richness, in its vulnerability, the love of God, reaching out to Nicodemus, consoling him, healing him, re-shaping him. The 'Intimate'? Nicodemus has taken the risk — has become vulnerable. And maybe, you observe him now, as he becomes a new creation — being born afresh of the Spirit. As he grows in faith; as he believes.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16

Richard Rohr says,

'Did you ever imagine that what we call 'vulnerability' might just be the key to ongoing growth?'

Rohr's approach, is to see the Trinity alongside those who are vulnerable; those who have been marginalised or in history, erased from the picture. For Richard Rohr, the Trinity by its nature expresses diversity: a mutuality of difference — yet one holy love.

Perhaps to wrestle with the Trinity, approaching it through vulnerability is an answer?

Richard Rohr writes this of the Trinity:

We like control; God it seems, loves vulnerability. In fact, if Jesus is the image of God, then God is much better described as "Absolute Vulnerability Between Three" than "All-mighty One." Yet how many Christian prayers begin with some form of "Almighty God"? If you're immersed in the Trinitarian mystery, you must equally say "All-Vulnerable God" too!⁵

⁵ Ibid p60

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