

A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Trinity

(Genesis 1: 1-2: 4a; Romans 8: 12-17; Psalm 8; Matthew 28: 16-20)

Here's your quiz challenge for the morning: I'm thinking of the name of a British radio comedy series that first aired on the BBC in 1978. Developed from a novel written by Douglas Adams in the early 70's, the radio series and the later stage productions were all on a science-fiction theme, following the adventures of a couple of survivors of the earth's destruction. The BBC acknowledged quite frankly that their listeners either loved or hated the program, with a clear majority expressing the *latter* view. Here's one final clue: the author of the novel claimed that the idea came to him while back-packing around Europe in 1971 with a copy of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Europe* in his hand and, while lying on his back somewhat intoxicated in a field in Austria, looking up at the stars, he thought it would be a good idea if someone wrote a hitchhiker's guide to the... *galaxy* as well.

So, here's your bonus quiz question: how could that crazy *Hitchhiker's Guide* possibly relate to our text and topic on this Trinity Sunday? That could be a bit of a stretch, couldn't it? Well, let's think first about what a *hitchhiker's guide* really is. What kind of information do you expect to find in such a guide? Will you find a listing of 5-star hotels, luxury resorts and airline schedules? No, you'll find very down-to-earth, practical information for people travelling *on the cheap*! You'll find information about clean but inexpensive hostels, parks you can sleep in without getting arrested, places where you can find temporary work. You'll find helpful information that's expressed in layman's terms, for people who are out there on the front lines, learning from experience, living by their wits, and even young people—no, *especially* young people—will be able to read it, understand it and be guided by it. Now, a hitchhiker's guide to the *galaxy* is simply a practical layman's travel guide but on a *wider scale*, with a much bigger frame of reference and far more *space* to cover. Such a guide may be a little fanciful and tongue-in cheek, but it's light and readable. And that's exactly what I want us to do this morning on the topic of the Trinity.

I propose a simple practical layman's guide, with no technical language or embellishment, in a form that young people especially might be able to digest. I do *not* want a discussion of the Trinity that sounds in any way like the *professionals* have had a hand in it, or that only the wise and mature could possibly understand it. You see, I think there's a problem with what the professional theologians have given us regarding the Trinity. Over 20 centuries, they have given us increasingly massive books articulating the *doctrine* of the Trinity. But the Trinity was there *before* it ever became encapsulated and encrusted with doctrine and dogma. Rather like the galaxy and the universe we live in, the Trinity was already there and already experienced by travellers in the faith, by hitchhikers along "The Way", as Christianity was first named. Long before theologians tried to explain it, the Trinity was simply a *mystery*—a vast uncharted mystery "in which we live and move and have our being", as Paul expressed it.

If there's one teaching of Jesus that I like to keep always close by, riding on my shoulder like a pirate's parrot so I can turn and glance at it frequently, one teaching that I would urge every keeper of the faith to keep within easy reach, it's the one about having the faith of a *child*, about being able to look at serious things with young and playful eyes, and about having the child's capacity for trust and wonder. In matters of Christian faith and living, if we're doing it the way Jesus suggested and illustrated, we don't get the luxury of *ever* being all grown-up, fully mature, self-righteously serious, or just old and crotchety in our attitudes toward others. We don't get those luxuries, and the goal of our faith is not in any event to graduate or to retire from active duty to "senior status". If we see and hear and follow Jesus in this matter, we're *all* children in faith, and it's enough simply to encounter God's *reality* with wide wonder-filled eyes, to cherish and savour that moment, and perhaps even to let loose with some gleeful expression of joyful noise. What we Christian folk do *not* need is to analyze the experience, systematize the process or turn that sparkling mystery of faith into heavy volumes of doctrinal statements to which all members must then give public affirmation. Another thing we need not do—yet something Christian people have always done with their doctrines—is to argue about them and divide over them. As much as we just love a good theological scrap or a little denominational mud-wrestling, that's not on the menu today, nor, frankly, should it ever be.

Let's take a somewhat younger, more playful, *pre*-doctrinal view toward the Trinity. Making doctrine out of faith, making heavyweight theological tomes with baffling language is a purely *adult* activity, and accordingly I'm suspicious of it. If I read the gospels with any accuracy, I think Jesus was suspicious of this too. So instead of looking at the *doctrine* of the Trinity from a grown-up perspective and the questionable assumption that we already understand what it's all about, let's look at the reality that comes *before* the doctrine, before all those words and explanations. Let's look at the mystery *under* the reality, and let's look at it as if for the *first* time, as if we were hitchhikers exploring a new territory and writing a simple guide for others who might follow.

Just to ease our transition into the youthful perspective, let me give you a little exercise in the form of a question. What's *your* initial instinctive response when confronted with a mystery, a riddle or puzzle? Do you immediately try to solve it, analyze it and explain it, and immediately reach for pen and paper? If you do, then you do not yet have the child's perspective. What kids do with a mystery is totally different. First, they make a sound like "Wow!" or "Cool!" And then they'll begin to play with it, whether just in their minds or right out in the open, they'll take that mysterious idea, roll it around, look at it from different angles, they'll poke it to see if it moves, and basically they'll just *play* with it.

There's a great illustration that goes back to about the fourth century. St. Augustine, in his later, theologically busy years, was walking along a beach one day while thinking deeply and puzzling over the difficulties of the doctrine of the Trinity. He happened to observe something you can almost always see at any beach, any time of year—a young boy with a little bucket, running back and forth from the water to the beach, carrying water to pour into a little hole he had dug. Augustine asked the lad what he was doing—which seems to me quite a needless question—but the boy replied, "I'm putting the ocean

into this hole." Suddenly Augustine, with that child's help, realized that in his theological cleverness, he had been trying to put an infinite God into his finite little hole of a mind, and that this great God, who cannot be contained in one person or nature, Augustine had been trying to force into a single tiny human concept. What the young boy was doing on that beach, by contrast, was perfectly legitimate. In child's play, you *can* do anything you *imagine*, and the bigger the *challenge*, the better. The lesson, for Augustine, was that you should *play* with a mystery. You should approach with imagination and wonder what you might not be able to solve with human reason.

When you suggest to a child that God is bigger than anyone can ever imagine, wider, deeper and more complex than you can figure, with more than just *one* nature or character, in short, when you tell modern kids that God is not "WYSIWYG"—which is a neat computer term that any kid will understand—you can usually hear the "Wow! Cool!" fairly quickly. And with even younger kids who would rather think in *action* terms, I mean in terms of what God *does* rather than what God is, I like to use this interactive analogy. Can you rub your tummy in circles while patting your head up and down? While you folks try that (go ahead, we're all kids here!) let me tell you how important that is. In order to do most things in life that are really neat, that make a difference and require skill, like playing the piano or driving a car, performing surgery or running a business, you have to be able to do *more* than *one* thing at a time. You've *got* to be able to rub your tummy *and* pat your head. Here's my point: to tell the little ones that God is a Trinity, Three-in-One, is like saying God can do *three* things at once, in perfect coordination, without missing a beat. And the kids say: "Wow, Cool!"

What the idea of God's Trinity really affirms, down on the bottom line where kids and hitchhikers can see it, is God's *difference* from us. It's God's *transcendence*, his otherness, his holy difference, that provides the sense of wonder and awe that we need right at the heart of our faith and at the very centre of worship. People, it's all about that sense of *wonder*, and that's not so tough to explain or difficult to understand. Kids can grasp that one without much prompting. We grown-ups, however, are notorious for demanding technical and complicated explanations. It's a little like the fellow who locked his car in a hurry but forgot to remove the key from the ignition. Realizing his mistake, he asked his passenger, "Why don't we get a coat hanger to open it?" "No, that won't work" his friend answered, "people will think we're trying to break in." "Well, what if we use a pocket-knife to cut around the rubber, then stick a finger in and pull up the lock?" "No," his friend replied, "people will think we're too dumb to use a coat hanger." "Well," sighed the car's owner, "we'd better think of something fast—it's starting to rain, and the sun-roof is wide open!"

We need to learn to look for the simpler answers first, for the clues right in front of us, for the reality that comes long before the grown-up doctrine arrives. What we need in worship, far more than the right words or correct doctrine, is that sense of *sheer wonder* in the presence of the transcendent God, the God who *isn't like* us, the God who, even when he becomes one of *us*, can still retain his *own* nature, his own *holy difference*.

If there's any sense in which we Christians and our churches in the Western world are losing ground as we go along—and I can think of a few dozen answers to that one—I think this might be the most disturbing of the lot: that we have all but lost the sense of *wonder* in worship, the sense that God Almighty—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is present here and we hitchhikers in faith ought to respond accordingly. Whether the worship *style* is formal and traditional or very informal and contemporary, doesn't matter. That sense of wonder in the presence of God seems to be on the run and only rarely present. William Willimon once made this observation: "There is a flattening that has gone on in much of the contemporary church. We build our sanctuaries now to resemble carpeted bedrooms; auditoria where the public comes to hear a preacher speak and a choir perform. On a Sunday morning, in these homey, comfortable surroundings in delicate pastel colours, there is so much smiling, so much light, so much thin celebration of our common humanity. What room is left for holy wonder and awe? Where might we go to experience God's holiness?" Willimon continued with this confession: "I have chafed, as a preacher, when a parishioner has justified to me why he or she was not at church, saying, 'Sundays are the day I try to get out on the lake or hike in the woods, and frankly, I feel more in the presence of God *out there* than I do in church.' And yet, I must admit these truant worshippers have a point. Sometimes it seems to me as if the whole point of modern church is to flatten out the mystery, to cut God down to our size, to make God our buddy, someone we can ask for a favour. In such a setting, no wonder that *wonder* goes missing too. In the quiet, captivating glory of nature it may well be possible to feel more holiness, more wonder and awe than we normally encounter in church."

Christian faith and worship are not ultimately about words and explanations, no matter how eloquent, nor about traditions or styles, nor about *doctrines* at all. Long before our doctrines got published or fought over, God created, Jesus came, and the Spirit moved and kept on moving. Our *doctrines* about these things don't really *change* anything, but God certainly does. Doctrines make poor containers, because all of them leak like a sieve. But the reality about God simply and naturally overflows, right out to where we are, and it refuses to be contained. There's even more fuel for that sense of awe in the presence of God.

It matters, more than we might realize, *which* perspective and viewpoint we bring into Christian worship. Unless we bring the perspective of the child and the wide-open mind of a hitchhiker on the road, and unless we can focus, with youthful fascination, on the wonder of God and the sheer awe of standing in God's presence, then we're not using the right tools. It matters eternally whether we are prepared to encounter the Holy Trinity of the Living God in a wonder-filled moment, and then in a trusting relationship that can last a lifetime. It's all about that child-like sense of wonder in the presence of our God.

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