

Trinity Sunday 2009

A couple of years ago, on a Saturday night, we cleared the chairs out of this cathedral nave and, with the help of a ceilidh band this cathedral community danced.

I suspect some people didn't approve. Maybe they didn't like dancing. Or thought they weren't much good at it. Like Fred Astaire's crit after his first Hollywood audition: *Can't act, can't sing, slightly balding: can dance a little*. More likely they thought they knew in their bones that dancing is inappropriate in church. At the Reformation dancing (in church and out of it) was banned. A while later the first edition of the Encyclopaedia noted

Dancing is usually an effect and indication of joy. Christians are not free from this superstition; for in Popish countries certain festivals, particularly those of the Sacrament and passion of our Lord, are celebrated with dancing.

Yet one of the founding fathers of Protestantism, William Tyndale, wrote in the prologue to his translation of the New Testament *That we call gospel is a greke word, and signifyeth good, merry, and joyfull tidings, that maketh mannes heart glad, and maketh him synge, daunce and leepe for joy.*

People of faith have long understood the spiritual significant of dance. After crossing the Red Sea Miriam takes a tymbrel and dances with her women. David dances before the ark of the Lord. The 4th century Bishop Eusebius writes of dancing in procession, at times set dances, then circle dances right and left. In the early middle ages the priests danced with the people on certain holy days as a sign of equality, though by the 12th century priests (predictably) would only dance with, other priests, and deacons with Deacons.

But why talk about dancing today?

Because today is Trinity Sunday. This is a unique day in the Church's year because it takes its name not from an event: There wasn't a Biblical Trinity moment. Today doesn't celebrate an event. It celebrates an experience: the experience the early Christians had of God in relationship, an experience of dynamism and mutuality within which these believers were caught up. To describe that experience they began to talk of 'three persons in one God', of mutual giving and receiving between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit whom they knew from scripture.

The problem once the church agreed to use the terminology of 'persons', as it got more powerful, more organised, less spontaneous, more hierarchical, more bureaucratic, the

emphasis shifted from the experience of living within the life of God, from the relationship of dynamic love, to theory about those individual persons of the Trinity.

To, as one of my youth group put it to me, a focus on two blokes and a bird.

We can perhaps have some sympathy with those great Medieval thinkers struggling to make sense of the essence of life, with integrity and honesty - and OK some 4c political shenanigans- trying to find words, and patterns to explain.

It's a process perhaps more familiar to us from science:

In the 20th century we saw biochemists struggle to discern the pattern that underlies the richness of our existence. After years of honest fumbling and formulation - and a few political shenanigans - Crick and Watson, developing the work of Rosalind Franklin and others- suddenly grasped the pattern. They built their double helix model of DNA, the shape that gave their work coherence; the shape which is fundamental to contemporary scientific thinking.

Early Christian thinkers struggled to find a shape which would give coherence to their understanding and their experience of God. In formulating the doctrine of the Trinity: one divine substance, three co-equal and co-eternal persons - they were having to stretch their minds to catch just a glimpse of the mystery of God.

The pattern of the double helix is mostly presented to us in two dimensions: as a static form. The reality is something much more dynamic, multidimensional. And so it is for the concept of the Trinity, often presented as something static even lifeless. And which doesn't therefore communicate

As the joke points out:

Jesus said, *Whom do men say that I am?* And his disciples answered and said, *Some say you are John the Baptist returned from the dead; others say Elijah or another of the old prophets.* And Jesus answered and said, *But whom do you say that I am?*

Peter answered and said, *"You are the Logos, existing in the Father as His rationality and then, by an act of His will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to his creation, but only in the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple."*

And Jesus answered and, said, "Yer What?"

With the re-emergence of experiential spirituality recently has come the rediscovery of the life of the Trinity. Rowan Williams, as usual struggles heroically and poetically to find words which do speak:

The whole story of creation, incarnation and incorporation into Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God Loves God.

But sometimes actions speak louder than words.

At the heart of Medieval thinking about the Trinity was a concept which the 21st century finds much more accessible. The word which the ancient Christian scholars used to describe the interior life of the Trinity, the life we can be caught up in, was *perichoresis*. *Dancing together and around*. Sadly that concept of the dance of the Trinity didn't capture the imagination of the Medieval church: though it did capture the imagination of artists: one of the most famous contemporary pictures, Botticelli's Nativity, has angels doing a literally divine circle dance above the stable roof.

So it is that dance can communicate more directly, more profoundly, than words what it means to live in the love of God.

In his novel *As It Is In Heaven*¹, Niall Williams describes an Italian violinist struggling to establish herself, with her partner, in impoverished Southern Ireland. At long last she takes out her violin, dares to play in public and finds the people of the village beginning to gather, some coming from a funeral. She is joined by a fiddler, and people begin to dance. Williams writes... *dancing even beyond the hearing of the music and making steps and keeping time to music that was already part of them...It was as if in those moments of music and dance each man and woman was seized with the knowledge of the boundless hardship and injustice of life and yet knew that this night...was one they would look back on from the edge of life, and that yes, there they had come as close as they ever had to true happiness.*

The writer Sylvia Townsend Warner, in her diary for 14 October 1958² when she was 65: *In the evening the Amadeus played Beethoven's opus 132 on the radio; and I danced to*

¹ Picador 1991

² Ed Clare Harman

the last movement, I rose up and danced among the cats and their saucers, and only when I was far too carried away to stop did I realize that I was behaving very oddly for my age...and that perhaps it was the last time I should dance for joy.

Well back in this nave a couple of years ago there were one or two who were a little over 65 dancing for joy. And I hope they and we, experiencing the dynamism of the life of the Holy Trinity, get a chance to dance here again soon.