

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Trinity Sunday 2018

As a young priest in Manchester I came across several terms of disparagement that were new to me as a southerner. It surprised me to hear something described as a 'duck egg', or 'neither use nor ornament'. I later realised that the second of these echoed a rather grand phrase of William Morris: 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.'

Today is Trinity Sunday. The occasion in the year when we are more or less obliged to turn our minds to the highest realms of theological abstraction - and when smart clergy invite someone else to do the preaching. But it's me today, and as its exam season I have set myself a theological question: "is the doctrine of the Trinity 'duck egg', 'use' or 'ornament'?"

Christians believe that God is not adequately described in the language of traditional monotheism. On the other hand, we certainly do believe in the internal unity and simplicity of God. God isn't some kind of metaphysical cake made up of different ingredients. For one thing God isn't created or made. There is no possible recipe for God. God is before and above every concept of making, or any process of fabrication, that we can imagine.

This is one of the reasons why the creed is so careful to say that the Son of God is 'begotten not made'. 'Begotten' is a very special word used to distinguish the origination of the Son of God from any other kind of origination. Certainly Jesus was not made or created in the ordinary way. The biblical way of expressing this was in terms of a young woman conceiving who, in the biological sense, had no right to do any conceiving: the virgin birth.

When it comes to the Holy Spirit the credal word is not 'begotten' but 'proceeding'. The Spirit comes out from God. Again, this is not a matter of making or creating. But from what, exactly, does the Spirit come forth? Our creed says that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. The Orthodox churches are not happy with this and their creed lacks the famous (well, famous to theologians) *filioque* clause; for them the Spirit proceeds from the Father only, not the Father *and the Son*.

For the Orthodox the *filioque* clause is a duck egg. They look to John's gospel chapter 15 verse 26 which talks about the Spirit 'proceeding from the Father'. In the west we focus a little later in the same gospel where Jesus breathes on the disciples after the resurrection and says 'receive ye the Holy Spirit' (John 20.22).

One question floating around behind this is something that all agree to be a theological duck egg: subordinationism. This is the idea that there is a hierarchy within the Trinity. Subordinationism is a heresy. It's wrong to think of the Father as the boss, the Son as the heir-apparent and the Spirit as the poor relation. And yet it is historically true that the Holy Spirit is often the Cinderella of the Trinity. If you look at the Christian year, or Christian art in general, or the windows of our Chapel in particular, you see them dominated by the second person of the Trinity. And that's perhaps understandable. Jesus was, after all, God incarnate, and one of the great things about being incarnate is that people can meet you in person, tell stories about you, write books about you and draw pictures and make films about you. Indeed, part of the purpose of the incarnation is to tell us what God, whom we cannot see, is like.

The first and the third persons of the Trinity are much harder to represent, though that hasn't stopped anyone, from Michelangelo to a young child,

imagining God the Father as a venerable old man with flowing robes and an equally flowing beard.

There hasn't been as much pressure to create images of the Spirit. They exist, of course, 'breath', 'wind', 'bird', 'tongues' of flame, but these are so dynamic, and so diverse, that people don't seem to get confused as to whether or not the Holy Spirit really is a bird, although they do think that God the Father is a father. The worst duck egg regarding the Spirit is the Cinderella factor. And this is one reason why the Orthodox are so against the *filioque* clause: they see it as making the spirit minor.

But it's the 'God as a grand old man' theology that is the worst duck egg of them all. This is why it's so helpful for Julian of Norwich to say 'Just as truly as God is our father so God is our mother'; although it has taken us about 600 years to notice that she said it. Julian was also right to correct herself when she wrote that 'the Son sits at his Father's right hand' with these words: 'But this does not mean that the Son sits on the Father's right hand, side by side, as one person sits beside another in this life; *for as I see it there is no such sitting in the Trinity*, but that he sits on his Father's right hand, that is to say, in the highest rank of the Father's joys' (*Revelations of Divine Love* Ch. 51). Again Julian is right – there is no such sitting; and nor is there any no actual right or left hand of God. But there is fullness of joy and mutual love.

I have probably given you enough theology to make it plain that far from being a duck egg itself, the point of the doctrine of the Trinity is to show up theological duck eggs for what they are. And there are dozens of them. The old word for them was 'heresies'. These days we don't persecute heretics, we live with them. I don't think this is weakness, because it is based on what you might call theological modesty. This is an intellectual humility which recognizes that while there may be a pure and perfect form

of doctrine in the mind of God, it is beyond our capacity either to think it or express it.

This means that bad theology is inevitable. But it also means that bad theology is only a problem when people forget that *all* theology is imperfect. And yet provided we are informed and sincere in what we believe, diligent in the studies that support our faith, and respectful of those who believe differently, God can and will smile on us (not that God has a face or can smile, of course).

When comes to the William Morris test (is it ‘use or ornament?’), my feeling is that the doctrine of the Trinity is not especially beautiful or inspiring; so not an ornament at all. But it is useful. In fact, the Trinity is an absolutely essential and irreplaceable part of the cognitive side of Christian living.

And this is because the doctrine of the Trinity isn’t an answer or an explanation. It’s a device that prevents us settling for inadequate and immature pictures of God; a way of pointing to a truth we can’t quite grasp.

The ‘Trinity’ is not a duck egg, but an expositor of duck eggs, and while not especially beautiful, it is not only useful but necessary, even if ultimately mysterious.

*The Revd Dr Stephen Cherry
Dean, King’s College, Cambridge*