

## Sunday 11 June 2006: Trinity Sunday

### The polyphony of God

**Readings: Romans 8: 12-17; John 3:1-17**

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God*

In Daniel Mason's novel "The Piano Tuner", Edgar Drake, receives a commission from the War Office calling on him to take his skills in the tuning of Erard grands to the jungles of Burma. It's the 1880s and the piano belongs to Surgeon-Major Anthony Carroll whose unorthodox methods in bringing peace to the war-torn Shan states include the use of both poetry and music. Up to that point, Drake, the piano tuner, had led an ordered, fairly sheltered life, grasping at the fringes of aristocracy or political power only when called upon to tune unplayed pianos in the drawing rooms of London society. But he's fascinated by the letters and writings of Carroll, the "Poet-Soldier", who sought to bring Bach fugues to distant lands.

*"He thought he would like to meet this Doctor, it was not often that one found such poetic words in the letters of military men. And Edgar Drake had great respect for those who find song in authority."*

"Finding song in authority" is a phrase that for me strikes a chord (if you'll excuse the pun) with the idea of the Trinity. There's a dynamism to a musical image of the Trinity that for me at least, seems to be missing in so many of the other images – shamrocks, steam/water/ice, cardboard boxes – that have been used to greater or lesser effect by theologians and preachers all struggling to capture something of the heart of the idea of Trinity. Even though my own image of three stumps but one wicket once gave me an excuse to organise a game of cricket in the aisles during an all-age service in a previous parish, I have to admit that the image of God as three wooden sticks left something to be desired!

Any attempt to fathom the doctrine of the Trinity has to have something about it that speaks of movement and energy, of dynamism and living relationship. It has to speak to us on those terms because the very idea of the Trinity itself arose of a living relationship, out of song that sang with a dynamic voice of authority and spoke to the heart of humanity.

Where did this idea of God, as three and yet one, come from? It came from the experience of God among us witnessed by the early Christians. The fact that it arose at all bears witness to the power of that experience. After all the early Christians were Jews by birth. From an early age they had been taught the Shema, the Jewish declaration of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord". This strong emphasis on one God was a distinguishing feature of the Jewish religion and culture in a world marked by polytheistic pagan religions. And yet these Jewish Christians, like Nicodemus who we heard about in our Gospel reading, came to believe that in the person of Jesus Christ they had experienced something of the Kingdom of God - the Kingdom that is from above and yet was present among them as both water and spirit, in the flesh and blood of the man Jesus.

And it didn't stop there. The New Testament scriptures tell us that even after Jesus' ascension they still knew the presence of God with them providing guidance in their daily lives, and enabling, enlivening and enriching their worship together, continuing to hold before them the promise of eternal life, life from above, in God's presence with them.

The idea of the Trinity didn't fall as some perfectly formed philosophical concept from the pen of a professor of theology. It came out of the prayers and reflections of ordinary people who heard the voice of God's authority singing in their lives in different notes, different tunes, yet recognised this music as being played and sung by one community of love. And more than that recognised that song as being the very music that dwells in our hearts and urges us to cry "Abba, Father!", urges us to know ourselves as children of God.

Music is a powerful image to speak of the Trinity because music is one of those few enterprises where a simultaneous multiplicity of sounds or voices is not only allowed but actually encouraged. Music is by its nature a language of community in a way that a static image is not. The authority that is at the heart of God is strengthened not weakened by the different melodies that are weaved together in the polyphonic song of Father, Son and Spirit. The chief attribute of polyphony – of different musical sequences and melodies overlapping one another as different voices sing – is its simultaneous non-excluding difference. More than one note is played at a time, and none of these notes is so dominant as to render another mute. Attention to one melody does not imply a diminished role for the others.

The doctrine of the Trinity expresses something of our understanding of the dynamic relationships at the heart of God. It proclaims something of our polyphonic understanding of God – one in which different voices are heard and distinctive melodies played simultaneously without damage to God's unity. At the heart of God, we see the potential to find song in authority, but we also see the potential for something else. We see the potential for a unity of purpose or a consensus that is constantly shifting because of the shifting nature of relationships themselves. That's what living relationships are like – they change and shift and challenge us to express consensus in different ways.

This Trinity, singing of a united authority in the different voices of living relationships, is the model for human relationships, for human community. One modern theologian, John Milbank, says that for Christians "true community means the freedom of people and groups to be different; a peaceful united, secure community implies absolute consensus, but a consensus that is only in and through the inter-relations of the community itself, and a consensus that moves and changes; *a consentus musicus*".

Over the next year we as a Christian community here at St Martin's are going to be thinking about relationships, about the different voices at the heart of our community as together we work on our new Mission Action Plan (MAP4). We've already identified that relationships are going to be key to that plan – our relationship with God, our relationships with one another as individuals, as congregations and as a complex living community of different people, gathering, worshipping and working here; our relationships with the communities and world around us at a heart of a vibrant, multifaith, multicultural, multi-faceted city. I believe that one of the key issues for us amidst all that complexity will be about finding a voice to sing with authority of what sort of community we want to be. One of the key issues for us will be about whether amidst all those different claims on us, we too can learn to live with a consensus that is absolute only to the extent that it moves and changes with the Spirit that sings in our hearts – the Spirit that calls us into relationship as children of the Triune God, heirs to the dynamic promises of Father, Son and Spirit.

What sort of community do we want to be? What sort of song do we want to sing? Do we want to be a community that is open to the world around us, open to the texture of sounds and melodies and voices that are different from our own but which also echo the song of the Spirit at work in the heart of creation? Do we want to be a community that is prepared to live with

the dissonances as well as the harmonies that arise when different voices and different melodies weave together? Do we want to be a community that finds its consensus and authority, only in and through the living relations of which we are part; a community confident and open enough to allow that consensus to move and shift as we listen together to the voice of the Spirit? Do we want to be a community that is able to take all of those experiences and offer them in an authentic song of praise and worship that draws us into the very heart of the eternal music of Father, Son and Spirit?

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