

For Trinity Sunday 2010

Many Christians really focus their attention on Jesus. Yet behind the God-Man lies a conundrum. How and why is God described as one, when there is a God-Father, a God-Jesus and a God-Spirit. And let us be in no doubt, the New Testament claims that all three are divine, not least because they are fit objects of worship, and that demands they either be God, or false gods.

I think a lot of our problems start because we start by thinking philosophically. We start from the idea that there is one God, an idea found in the Old Testament but also in the Greek philosophers. In fact, we have to be careful with the OT because it does not reveal a strict monotheism (that the one God is one person). As Margaret Barker has pointed out, there are great difficulties sometimes in working out whether “the Lord” and “the angel of the Lord” are actually one and the same, or creator and creature. And then, to pre-empt what will come later, there’s that puzzling story in *Genesis* 18 where God appears to Abraham at Mamre as three men.

Anyway, we start with God is one, and when Jesus and the Holy Spirit turn up, we sort of bolt them on to the “One God”, a bit like a dodgy builder who promises to extend and renovate your house, but ends up leaving you with a creaky, leaky, draughty monstrosity. And, it just never really seems right, does it?

So let’s put that approach aside, and start with the Bible and its revelation of God. If we look at the New Testament, and especially the writings of John, we get a primary description of God as Love, rather than God as (strictly) one.

Let’s consider what that means. Love usually demands more than one person. We instinctively feel that there is something not quite right with someone who is in love with him- or herself.

An old Greek myth sums it up nicely. There's a version in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 3¹ which was written slightly before the NT. Narcissus is a handsome Greek youth, who, one day, sees his own reflection in a pool of water. He's so taken with it, that he falls in love with himself, fails of course to possess his own reflection, pines away and eventually dies. This is a story about the frustration and aridity of self-love. Its spirit is admirably caught in Salvador Dali's *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*:



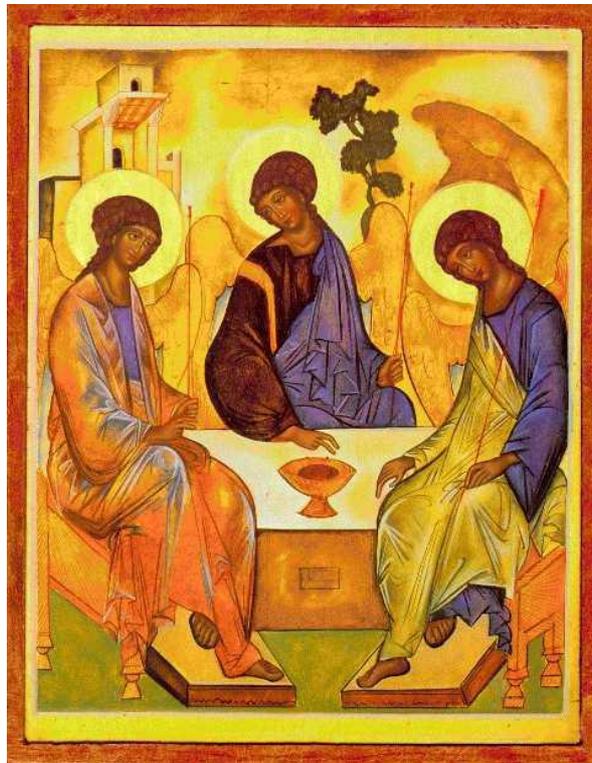
<http://www.virtualdali.com/assets/paintings/37MetamorphosisOfNarcissus.jpg>

The figure on the left is Narcissus, gazing at his reflection, and the figure on the right, maintaining the same shape or posture, represents his destiny. It's an odd picture, and it is, in a way, rather off-putting. This is not a landscape or environment which I would wish to be part of. It shows the ultimate sterility of self-love. It shows where we might end up if we end up with a God in love with himself.

¹ <http://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidMetamorphoses3.html>

So let us consider what happens if we see God as love, but not self-love. This means that there must be at least two persons involved. The NT record always points towards three being involved, probably because it is possible for two people to enter into a *folie a deux*, again a very obsessive kind of relationship.

So let us picture God as a relationship between three people. We'll use the famous icon of the Trinity by Rublev to illustrate this. It is an icon which tells that story of the three visitors in *Genesis 18*:



<http://www.stjohnscamberwell.org.au/Images/trinity.jpg>

In this picture the three figures are drawn so as to be equal: I'm reliably informed by those who know, that the three characters are set around an equilateral triangle (all sides the same) set in perspective. Instead of the rather repellent Dali-esque landscape, I find that this picture draws me into it, which is a great effect if we think about all the positive values that love, and people who know how to love, communicate. That love of God is, of course, expressed in his constant giving of himself: in creation, in redemption

in sanctification, respectively, the Father as Creator, the Son as Redeemer, and the Spirit as Sanctifier. This is love which does not remain “turned in”, but flows out to create, redeem and renew (sanctify).

If you ask me why I believe in a Trinity, or even, why I believe it is necessary to believe in a Trinity, this is my best shot. It is because God is love, and God as one who is three persons loving in relationship creates, redeems, renews and welcomes others into his life. God as a narcissist (God in love with himself) just simply wouldn't care, and the question would never be asked, because there would never have been a creature to ask it.

Now, that's all very well, but does it have practical consequences apart from giving me a warm feeling about God. Yes, it does. Genesis 1:26-27 tells me that I am made in the image of God. Therefore, if I am to be true to how I am made, I must be a person who loves, who welcomes others, who lives and loves others, not just myself. God as Love, tells me, made in his image, that my primary action must be to love, and not myself, but others.

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Further Reading

Barker, Margaret, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God*, London: SPCK, 1992.

Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, *Christology: A Global Introduction: An Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, 133-39.

Young, Wm. Paul, *The Shack*, Newbury Park, CA: Windblown, 2007, 90-105.

Zizioulas, John, *Being as Communion*, London: DLT, 1985.