

THE TRINITY IN THE BULLRING¹

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THERE are four ways in which a preacher or guild speaker can treat any Christian doctrine: (a) proclaim it; (b) explain it; (c) defend it; (d) prove it. This last way is clearly ruled out where the doctrine of the Trinity or indeed any mystery of faith is concerned, though the temptation to try and prove anything and everything is one to which I suspect the C.E.G. mind, so commonly pre-occupied with apologetics, is peculiarly prone. I think it is very important for the C.E.G. speaker to remind himself constantly that there is a world of difference between an apologetic argument in defence or support of the faith and a proof. An apologetic argument, when addressed at least to the unbeliever, can never be more than persuasive, attractive, suggestive. There can never be any mathematical certainty about it, or an overwhelming weight of evidence, and that is what the word proof normally means to most of us. So we should not be surprised when our incautious claims to prove anything about Christianity receive no more than a sceptical hearing. But at least we are all agreed, I hope, that we have no business to set about proving the Catholic doctrine of the Blessed Trinity.

Ways (a)-(c) are all legitimate and all necessary methods of treating this or any other doctrine. The point I want to make here is that the first way *must come first*. It seems to me to be a weakness of much Catholic teaching, preaching, and apologetics, that the first way nearly always gets left out. We are so busy proudly explaining and loyally defending the gospel, that the proclamation of it mostly gets left in the rather inadequate hands of the hot gossellers. Perhaps we are just a little too ready to join in the ridicule with which the average loiterer greets the utterances of these good people. Their rhetorical style is not usually deserving of admiration, their voices are often harsh, their minds perhaps rather unbalanced, their tactical approach is almost always unwise; in all these respects the C.E.G. is well

¹ A talk given to the Birmingham Catholic Evidence Guild in December 1959.

advised to strive for the greatest possible contrast. But what they are trying to do is something that needs to be done, something that the apostolic Church was founded to do, and that is preach or proclaim a message, the gospel. All of us, from the pope downwards, even the firmest of believers, need to go on having the gospel's message proclaimed to us; how much more the crowd in the Bullring!

The point is really very simple; it is not much use explaining or defending something to a person who has never really come across what you are so lucidly explaining or skilfully defending. The first thing that has to be done is to *show* it to them, to *present* it, to *introduce* it, to make it real. That is what I mean by proclaiming the gospel, proclaiming the mystery of the Trinity. That is what the Bible does with the doctrines of our religion, and if we want to do it effectively, we cannot do better than copy the Bible, because this in effect is how God reveals, or shows, himself.

I don't think it is rash to say that Scripture explains nothing—if it did, it would not be in such constant need of explanation. What it does is to throw God at you, and his revelation and salvation. Its challenge is not 'Do you see? Do you follow? This is how it works'; but rather 'Look! Behold! Be astounded and amazed!' 'And going away quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy, the women ran to tell his disciples' (Matt. xxviii, 8). That is the authentic tone of the scriptural presentation of God's message. It is like a conjurer who *presents* his tricks with all the effect he can muster, but takes very little trouble to *explain* them. And who would thank him if he did? So too you cannot expect to be very enthusiastically received if you laboriously explain the mystery of the Trinity to people who have never encountered the mystery and to whom it means nothing. The first thing we have to do is to help them encounter it in Scripture.

How then does Scripture *present* the Trinity to us? The nearest it ever gets to making a full statement of the doctrine is in John xiv-xvii, our Lord's discourse after the last supper. One might call this a static presentation of the mystery. It is almost as though the divine Persons were finally and definitively introduced to the disciples; which is perhaps why this presentation of the mystery is not paralleled elsewhere in the new testament, and why it could scarcely be taken as a model for the preacher. Needless to say, these chapters do nothing to explain the doctrine.

For the rest, we might say that the mystery of the Trinity emerges from the new testament dramatically or dynamically. It is unfolded as God reveals himself in action, in saving and sanctifying action. Thus it is not shown us in isolation, or in a separate treatise devoted to it—you won't find an epistle of St Paul's devoted to the subject; its revelation is interwoven inseparably with that of other mysteries of faith, with three in particular: that of the divine unity, of the redemption, and of the Church.

So now we have to ask ourselves, how *does* God reveal himself in saving or sanctifying action?—or rather, we have to ask the new testament, and in this matter as in every other, the new testament will drive us back, for a full appreciation of its message, to the old. Meanwhile it answers our question in one word—*missions*. Sendings; it is by *sending* his Son to become man and redeem us, and then by sending his Holy Spirit to sanctify and quicken the Church of the redeemed, the Spirit of Christ sustaining the body of Christ, that God makes himself known to us as Three. The cardinal text here is Galatians iv, 4-6: 'But when the fulness of time came, God *sent* forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. Then because you are sons, God *sent* forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba, Father".'

The background of God's revelation of himself in the new testament, summed up in this text, is of course his revelation of himself in the old testament. 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God' (Deut. vi, 4). 'I am who I am. Say to the children of Israel, He who is sent me to you' (Exod. iii, 14). It is the one God of Israel, he who is, who reveals himself as three by sending the Son and the Holy Ghost.

But because the revelation is made in the sendings, the new testament avoids all impression of initiating us into a sort of divine mathematics. What we are initiated into is *divine life*. The sending of the Son and the Holy Ghost are vital activities which terminate in life and begin in life. They terminate in the divine Persons living in us, what is called the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in the faithful. 'If any man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our abode with him' (John xiv, 23). By this living of the divine Persons in us, we are enabled to live in them, to share that inner divine life in which the sendings of the divine Persons

begin, to which indeed they correspond, and which they manifest. The sendings forth of the divine Persons into the world in time correspond to the 'goings forth' of the divine Persons within God in eternity, to what theology calls the divine processions, those eternal movements of divine life within the divine stillness by which the Persons are distinguished from each other; the eternal begetting of the Only-begotten Son and the eternal 'breathing forth' of the Breath of divine love, the Holy Spirit.

To conclude then; before attempting to explain the Trinity from the C.E.G. platform, I think we should *proclaim* it, present it in the language and the pictures of Scripture. Begin with the missions, which are vivid, concrete events that can make an appeal to the imagination; go on to the indwelling, which gives value to the missions; and end with the processions and the distinction of the three Persons within the divine unity: end, that is to say, by introducing your hearers to the mystery of the mystery. But one should practise what one preaches, and so here is a brief example of the sort of talk I envisage.

Sample talk on the Trinity from a C.E.G. platform

I thought this evening I would talk about God. I know this is rather impertinent of me, because in fact I know very little about God. I have no first-hand experience of him; I have never met him—who has? St John himself admits in his gospel that 'No one has ever seen God'. So how can I, or anybody else, know anything about him? Well, we can't, directly, but indirectly we can know something about him from what he does or has done. Like Man Friday's footprints; Robinson Crusoe hadn't seen him, but on seeing the footprint, he knew there was a man on the island; had he been trained in tracking, doubtless the footprint would have told him quite a few details about the man. Well, God has left his footprints and his fingerprints all over the place; you only have to look at the world around you to gather something about him, if you are a sufficiently sharp-sighted observer; not very much, and nothing perhaps very certain, but still something.

However, God has done something more than make the world; he has performed some much more special activities, by which we can know much more about him; he has intervened in human

history, to deal with the sorry mess that mankind was making of it. He has unfolded a plan for our salvation, for helping us, that is, to reach the goal we were intended for of everlasting happiness. The Bible is the account of that gradually unfolded plan.

How did he set about it? Well, first he chose a special people, the Jews. And then he told them one or two important things about himself, that clever philosophers perhaps might have worked out for themselves, but which most people only too readily got wrong. When Moses at the burning bush asked him what his name was, he said 'I am who I am'; He who is, that's my name. God just is; he is real, so real that you can't just make him up as the fancy takes you, which is what the heathen people all round Moses were busy doing, and what even clever philosophers have always found it very tempting to do. And what's more, God is infinite and mysterious and incomprehensible. You can't put a special name to him, that's what Moses learnt; you can't tie him down and limit him to being this sort of thing or that sort of thing by classifying him with a special name. He just is who he is, he is his very 'isness', in a way that neither you nor I nor anything else just is. He is—no 'was' or 'will be' about him; but about us there is much more 'was' and 'will be' than 'is'.

Another important thing he told the Jews was that there is only one of him—he is unique, there is only one God. 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God.' There is no other. This is something the heathen got very wrong, with their innumerable gods and goddesses. And of course getting the elements wrong like this in religion means that you are very seriously handicapped in trying to reach that goal of eternal happiness.

Let's just consider *how* God told his people about himself, how he talked to them. We are not to suppose that he simply stood up and talked to them as I am talking to you. What he did was to *send* them messages by special messengers like Moses, who are called the prophets. These prophets were *inspired*, that is, God had breathed his own Spirit into them, so that they could say and even do extraordinary things they wouldn't otherwise even have been able to think of, and in this way deliver the messages he wanted delivered. The major lesson taught by the prophets which we are concerned with now, was that the people were to look forward to one final messenger whom God would send to lead them at long last fully and completely into God's promised salvation, into

the promised rest. This messenger was the expected Messiah, the anointed one.

At last the time came, and God did send this messenger, and he turned out to be more than a mere messenger, more than a prophet; the messenger God sent this time was his own Son, whom we call Jesus Christ. He gathered around him a group of followers, he taught them about the kingdom of God which he had come to establish and to make us members of. And then he inaugurated this kingdom in a most extraordinary way; he let himself be put to death, an innocent victim, on the cross. He died to redeem men from their sins, to buy us back from the tangle of debts our sins had involved us in, to bail us out of Satan's prison at the price of his own blood, to make up by this supreme act of generosity, this perfect self-sacrifice, this deed of love than which none can be greater—greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends; how often have you read that on war memorials? Well, no man has ever shown greater love in this way than our Lord Jesus Christ, and by it he made up for all the wickedness and meannesses and selfishnesses by which men have ever spoilt God's world.

But that was not the end of it; after three days he rose again from the dead, to show us where real life is to be looked for—beyond this world with God who made it. That is where true and everlasting happiness is to be found, with God in the risen Christ. Then after he had gone back to heaven, returned to the Father who had sent him into the world, someone else was sent from God. He sent his Holy Spirit in tongues of fire and a mighty rushing wind upon the followers of Christ, to fill them with divine life and divine power and the knowledge of divine truth.

This is how St Paul puts it in a nutshell: When the fulness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, that we might receive the adoption of sons. Then because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father'.

God has sent us his Son and his Spirit. Who did the sending? God. And who was sent? God. God the Father sent, God the Son was sent, God the Holy Ghost was sent. What a lot this tells us about God! Are there now three Gods then? No, what God had told the Jews is still true; Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God. Is it then one God in three disguises? Like an actor

taking three parts? No, the Son is distinct from the Father, and the Holy Ghost is distinct from the Son and the Father. They are three—but three what? Well, remember God's name, told to Moses: He who is. God *is*, we might say, so completely, that he *is* three times over. In psychologists' jargon we might say he is three Egos, he can say Me three times over. The way we put it is to say God is three Persons.

It is baffling to the wits, it is impossible to understand. But then why should we ever think that God is possible to understand? It may be impossible to understand, but it is very necessary to believe, because our eternal happiness consists in sharing the life of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. God didn't unfold the mystery of his being simply to give us something to break our heads on. He sent his Son and his Spirit into the world in order to make our life a more than human life, a share in the divine life. And the divine life consists in the Son eternally issuing from the Father, and the Holy Spirit being eternally breathed forth from the Father and the Son. It is into that eternal movement of uncreated life that we are destined, if we will only believe, to be caught up. This is eternal life, to know thee, the Father, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent.

No man, says St John, has ever seen God. No; but how does he go on? The only-begotten Son of God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him.



THE PASSION OF THE HOLY MARTYRS PERPETUA AND FELICITY: II

(TRANSLATED BY H. O'D.)

NEXT we have a description of St Satorus' vision, written by himself.

We had suffered (he wrote) & we left the body & started being carried towards the East by 4 Angels whose hands weren't touching us. We weren't going up lying face-upwards but rather like going up a gentle slope. And once we were clear of the world below we saw an immense light & I said, 'Perpetua