

Trinity Sunday, 27th May 2018

The Most Holy Trinity can seem such a difficult and almost abstract concept, and yet we refer to it all the time: indeed, I just made the sign of the cross, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost”. The Trinity: three Persons in one God. Ever since Christ commissioned his apostles to go and baptise “*in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti* (in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost)” (Mt 28:19), the Church has believed in the Trinity, even though it took a degree of time to develop the doctrine, as would be expected. It was however considerably later, in the Middle Ages, that an actual feast of the Holy Trinity began to develop as well.

It was in this very country that a feast dedicated to the Trinity in fact began to become popular and on this particular Sunday, the First Sunday after Pentecost. This was probably on account of that most popular of English medieval saints: St Thomas of Canterbury. Thomas Becket had a special devotion to the Trinity and was consecrated archbishop on this very day in the year 1162 (he had only been ordained priest the day before!), and said his first Mass in the Trinity Chapel of his Cathedral at Canterbury, the same chapel (if only to be shortly rebuilt) in which his shrine would remain until its tragic destruction.

Later in the Middle Ages, the Black Prince, the eldest son of Edward the Third, was also buried in the Trinity Chapel; his own personal devotion to the Holy Trinity reflected in the tester, suspended above his effigy, depicting Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

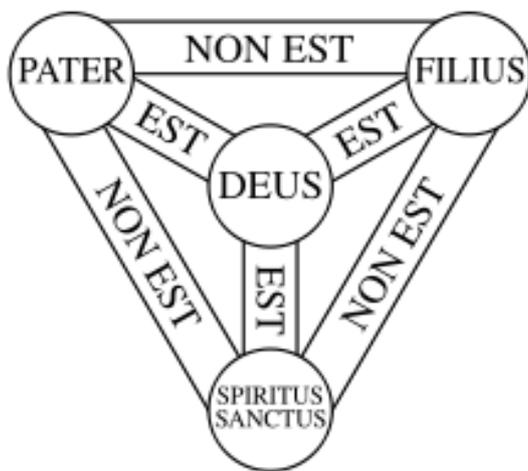


It is typically an anthropomorphic, and indeed zoomorphic, image of Trinity: God the Father shown as an old man (hence ‘anthropomorphic’, that is, ‘in the form of a man’); the Son, naturally enough, in his human nature on the cross; and, between the two, the Holy Spirit hovering in the form of a dove (‘zoomorphic’ meaning ‘in the form of an animal’, which also goes for the four animals, symbolising the four Evangelists, who frame the whole image).

We realise of course that this is only a symbolic representation of the Trinity and that any representation of God and the Trinity can only be symbolic as such. God is simply beyond our comprehension, as St Paul told us in the Epistle: “How incomprehensible are his judgments, and how unsearchable his ways!” (Rm 11:33). And yet God has revealed something of himself, he has revealed to us that he is Trinity: three Persons in one God. At the end of the Epistle, St Paul seems to allude to this fact: “For of him, and by him, and in him, are all things” (Rm 11:36). It reminds me of a favourite hymn of mine, *O quanta qualia* (O what their joy), by Peter Abelard and therefore penned in the Middle Ages, which finishes with: “Of whom, and in whom, and through whom are all; of whom, the Father; and in whom, the Son, through whom, the Spirit, with them ever One”.

Although words, such as those in hymns and even in Holy Scripture, are indeed able to enlighten us a little regarding this great mystery, images can still be helpful to us. When one thinks of the Middle Ages, knights in armour, like the Black Prince, probably come to mind. Above the tester over his tomb in Canterbury Cathedral hung copies of pieces of his armour (the originals are in fact still around and kept nearby), among which is his shield emblazoned with his coat of arms as Prince of Wales. If you were anyone in the Middle Ages, you had your coat of arms. And this craze for heraldry even meant that God himself had to have his own coat of arms (he surely was someone important)!

God’s coat of arms is known as the ‘Shield of the Trinity’ or the *Scutum Fidei* (the ‘Shield of Faith’), in reference to the spiritual armour mentioned by St Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians (6:16). It forms a triangle, and if you saw it, you would perhaps recognise it. I remember first seeing it in a book as an adolescent and being fascinated by it. Though it is an image, or really a diagram, it does have words (usually Latin) within it, and it is precisely that combination of image and words which lends it a certain potency.



The names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (*Pater*, *Filius*, and *Spiritus Sanctus*) are placed at each of the corners of the triangle, and are joined together by the words “is not (*non est*)”, written on each of the three sides of the triangle: each one of the Persons of the Trinity is therefore distinct from the other two. In the centre of the triangle is written “God

(*Deus*)”, and each of the three Persons is joined to the centre by way of the word “is (*est*)”: hence each one of the Persons “is” God.

The ‘Shield of the Trinity’ has a charming logic to it, with its repeated statements of “is not” and “is”, and so wonderfully encapsulates in a very visual way the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, described in the Preface of the Mass as comprising “what is proper to each Person, and their unity in essence (*in personis proprietates, et in essentia unitas*)”: three Persons in one God. While being the natural shape for representing the Trinity, the triangle is also the ideal shape for a shield.



The ‘Shield of the Trinity’ is also the ‘Shield of Faith’, and indeed our Profession of Faith, the Creed, is of our faith in the Trinity: “*Credo in unum Deum* (I believe in one God). *Patrem omnipotentem* (the Father almighty), [...] *Et in unum Dominum Iesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum* (And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God). [...] *Et in Spiritum Sanctum* (And in the Holy Ghost)”.

Let us imitate our medieval forebears then and celebrate today’s feast of the Most Holy Trinity with deep devotion and now let us invoke again the name of the three divine Persons: “In the name [...]