

The Most Holy Trinity, Year A

I offer three reflections for this central feast. The first is my own homily. This is followed by two reflections by Father Kevin O'Shea CSsR, one of Australia's leading theologians. The first is from an earlier date. The second is 'hot off the press'. He kindly gave me permission to include them here. Hopefully you might find the reflections complementary.

I. My homily

For many weeks we have been reflecting on the central events of our faith: the death and resurrection of Jesus. Last Sunday we prayed that Jesus' Spirit would once again fill our hearts, our communities, our church and our world.

Those whose hearts were open to see Jesus saw him coming to them and relating to them from God. It was Jesus' intimate experience of and communion with God that enabled him to relate so beautifully to those whose lives he touched. It is this that is the subject of today's contemplation. On this Feast of the Trinity we reflect on how we experience God and so on who God is. In this reflection lies the secret of discovering who we are, for we are created by God and held in existence by God's powerful love. All knowledge is distorted to the extent that we do not know God. All our relationships are distorted to the extent that we are not in a love-relationship with God.

Writers on religious experience speak of the numinous and the mystical. The numinous is our experience of God coming to us from outside: from nature, from people, from the events of our lives. The divine comes to us when we encounter the world around us. In the tradition of Israel, this is spoken of as God's *Word* to us. The mystical is our experience of God at the depths of our own being. In the tradition of Israel this is spoken of as an experience of God's *Spirit*. Revelation happens when the outer Word and the inner Spirit come together. One of the great insights in religion is that of monotheism – the recognition that there is only one God – that is to say, that there is one source of religious experience; that this one God is the reason we all belong to each other, indeed, to the cosmos. Religious wars and religious division are absurd, for this one God is the heart and the beyond of everyone and everything.

We have Jesus to thank for the second great religious insight: that this one God is Love; that it is love that explains creation, gravity, the periodic table and our attraction to each other.

We experience God's Love-Spirit mystically, within our hearts. This can happen at any time, whenever we sense that mysterious love that sustains and envelops us, through our intimate family relationships, through kind words spoken, through the surprise of

love wherever we encounter it. The Spirit of love moves our souls when we read the Scriptures, and when we come here to meet those who share our faith and to listen to the readings. We experience the Spirit whenever we are aware of the echo in our hearts as others respond to us in love.

We experience God's Love-Word in nature and in the events of our lives, especially in people. This word of God has been speaking to men and women from the beginning and in every culture. God speaks through nature, through the holy men and women who are in touch with God's Spirit, and above all through those who love us. It is our belief as Christians that it is this Word of God that is incarnate and finds its perfect human expression in Jesus of Nazareth. He is God's focal Word, helping us see and respond to the essence of God's Word as a life-giving, love-giving, self-giving word of love. For Jesus' disciples Jesus it is also in communion with Jesus that we experience the Spirit of God that he experienced. We share in his mystical communion.

As we experience God's Spirit and God's Word we are aware of the infinite depths of mystery that lie beyond our experience. God is at the heart of our lives but is always beyond anything we can see or imagine. Thanks to Jesus we dare to call this transcendent God 'Father', for we have come to believe that we should love God, for it is God who continues to create us out of love. And so we relate to God as the transcendent Source of all being, as Word-made-flesh, and as Holy Spirit.

Some thirty or so years ago I was chaplain at the University of NSW. One day a young man who was working as a gardener there popped into my office and asked me to explain the Trinity to him. Fortunately I had enough sense to pause and to ask him first how he saw it. In a way that nicely avoided abstraction, he went straight to the heart of the mystery by speaking of the Trinity in terms of dance. He thought of the Father as the Dance, the Son as the Dancer and the Spirit as the Dancing. We come to know the Dance by watching the Dancer. We experience the Dance when we are drawn by the Dancer into the Dancing. One could speak of God as Life, of Jesus as the one who lived this life and of the Spirit as the experience of living. Perhaps best of all one can speak of God as Love, of Jesus as the Lover who incarnates this love, and of the Spirit as the experience of loving that we enjoy because of Jesus.

We find our true selves in relationship to the God who, as Father, continues to hold us in being, as Word, continues to dialogue with us, and as Spirit breathes healing love into our broken lives. John of the Cross reminds us of the deep, personal level of intimacy to which God invites us. It is this intimacy that we celebrate in today's liturgy of the Blessed Trinit. Saint John of the Cross writes: 'Jesus takes you tenderly in his arms, and there gives you his love. And when you are thus one with him, he lifts you to the Father, where God's own joy will be your joy. For as the Father and the Son and the Spirit who proceeds from them live in one another, so it is with you. For, taken wholly into God, you will live the life of God'(Romance 4,15-17).

The answer to the question ‘Who am I’ is found here. We are creatures called to share in the intimacy of God’s love. That is why we experience this insatiable longing for love.

So far we have been reflecting on how we experience and relate to God. The Feast of the Trinity, however, says more than that. It expresses an astonishing insight into the very being of God himself. We cannot expect to be able to grasp God’s being with our tiny minds, but, thanks to Jesus, we are sure that God is such as to be able to be experienced by us in the ways we have described.

We believe that God is almighty, but we must remember that we are speaking of almighty-love. God is not to be imagined as an individual, isolated being. God is communion; God is love. We know that when we experience love we long to be fully united with the one we love. With us, the union is always imperfect – there are always barriers to full communion. In God, the God whom we experience as Father, Word, and Spirit, the communion is perfect.

Knowing that God is Spirit reminds us to be attentive to the divinely inspired movements of our own heart: movements of longing as we yearn for closer communion with him whose Spirit inspires us; movements of wonder and praise as we rejoice in his being with us; movement of trust as we confide ourselves to God’s love; movements of pleading as we give expression to our needs. Knowing that God is Spirit reminds us to be sensitive to these same movements in every man and every woman.

Knowing that God is Word reminds us to be attentive to the words and actions through which God speaks to us, and the words and actions through which we respond to him.

Knowing that God is Father, we learn to reverence the sacred ground of each person’s spirit, and be attentive to each person’s word, as together we journey towards him who is the Father of all.

Let us allow a saint to have the last word. Again I quote from Saint John of the Cross: ‘God dwells within you. You are yourself the tabernacle, his secret hiding place. Rejoice, exult, for all you could possibly desire, all your heart’s longing is so close, so intimate as to be within you; you cannot *be* without God.’

II. First Reflection by Father Kevin O’Shea CSsR

Every time we make the sign of the cross, we pray to the Trinity – in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Every time the feast of the Trinity comes up, I know a lot of priests and teachers who go on holidays! The faith-formula is simple. The interpretation – maybe we don’t have one that satisfies all comers. We have another go at it every year, when the festal season from Christmas to Pentecost is over. Here we go again!

There is one, undivided, indivisible God. Jews, Christians, Muslims all believe that. Christians go on and talk about three persons in that one God. Christian theologians go on and say the three persons are not three 'somebodies' – like distinct and separate entities. That would be heresy. But let's be honest. It is very hard, given the limits of language, to use words like 'Father' and 'Son' and NOT give an impression – even if a rapidly denied one – that we ARE talking about distinct and separate entities! The Holy Spirit is even more difficult to handle....

Is there any other way of negotiating multiple persons in one undivided Godhead? Here goes.

If you have been reading my comments on Sundays and Feasts over the last couple of years (or more), you will know that I often talk about kenosis – self-emptying. I often propose a model of being human, not in a grandiose and glorious way, but in a self-emptying and poured-out way. It is, sure, the way I understand Jesus – the way of the crucified. I don't want to repeat that here.

Often, when we think of our lives as our little attempt at emptying and pouring out ourselves for others, we think about our dying. We might well see it as the final and most complete emptying and pouring out of ourselves. I think it is. We might also imagine God – in all God's fullness – filling up our final emptiness with God's presence, and we think we have some idea of what heaven will be like. I think that is a good approach to it, too.

But sometimes I wonder if that is the whole story. What I wonder about is the Holy Spirit. We call the Spirit, Love. We call the Spirit – working from the word spirit itself – a Breath of Love. I like the word 'gasp' of Love even better. I like to understand this Gasp of Love as done mutually, together, by both Father and Son. It is like their cry of delight when they are together.

But I would like to stop there, and chance my arm a bit. The Father would be utterly and completely engaged in that Gasp of Love. So would the Son. This means that each of them empties whoever they are into that Gasp. So I can imagine these two divine persons as self-emptying and outpouring into the Gasp so that nothing is left for either of them independently of that. The Spirit, too, as the Gasp, seems to lack any 'solidity' (such as the words 'Father' and 'Son' would suggest, even if that is immediately qualified and denied for the sake of the oneness of the one God). The Spirit is all Breath.... So I can actually come up with three utterly poured out and solidity-emptied 'persons'. I put persons in inverted commas, because all other persons aren't that poured out or solidity emptied.

So I am beginning to think that it is not just you and I that are asked to empty ourselves, it was not just Jesus who emptied himself, but that God – and in particular the three

persons in God – is actually in an eternal gasp of self-emptying. Maybe it is the only way (or at least one way) that three persons are in one ultimate kenosis, or one Gasp or Breath or Spirit. Maybe to understand God as three in person like this is a marvellous way of protecting the oneness of the One God. The communion of the three is a communion in the Gasping and the Gasp.

Yes, if God is like that, God would lose a lot of characteristics we often attribute to God. God – the Father – would lose a lot of paternalism. God – the Son – would lose a lot of filial (or is it Oedipal?) achievement in being equal to his Father. God – the Spirit – would lose a lot of mysterious strangeness, and the impression that he is the unnecessary (and theologically uninvited) third party. But that loss perhaps is not such a bad thing. It makes God and all persons in God follow the same ‘rules’ as we do and Jesus did.

Is today the feast of the truth of the kenotic way, even for and within God?

I am trying to focus on the Spirit, not one extra problem after we thought we understood the Father and the Son, but the key to a deeper grasp of both Father and Son...None the less, it is only one limited way of trying to understand. Can you grasp a gasp?

We must admit that in history, the early believers worked hard to understand the Father and the Son and left their pondering about the Spirit till later. It was not until 381 (at the 2nd council of Constantinople) that the church defined the divinity of the Spirit! The theology of Father and Son had been worked out earlier (at Nicea especially in 325) – without using the Spirit as the key to it.

This is the feast day of the Trinity, but especially of the Holy Spirit, given to us, as we say, on the first Pentecost. I would like to reflect on the Holy Spirit as the Spirit – or Gasp - of Love.

During the festal season, now almost complete, we have left Matthew’s gospel aside a little – we will return to it soon, and for the rest of the year. Matthew’s gospel is about God. Its title – almost – is ‘God with us’ (Mt 1,23). In Mt, God is present everywhere, but often in a self-effacing way, receding behind Jesus. God is present but hidden, except in Jesus. God is emptied into Jesus. God is with us in everyday life, as the horizon or atmosphere in which we live. God is with us there, in a totally positive, gracious, forgiving, understanding way. Mt is not far from Jn’s great statement: “God is Love”.

I want today to take a direct look at that truth. It opens up more about the Gasp.

The first principle is that God has loved us, indeed, that God has loved us ‘first’, absolutely, primordially, before we had anything to do with it, and this love is irrevocable. This love that God has given us is the same love God has for God, the same

Love the Father gasps towards the Son (and the Son joins in...)

Love tends to a Beloved. You could say that God, who is a Lover, loves God, the Beloved God. The first gift of lovers to one another is Love. You could say that God the Lover gives Love as a Gift to God the Beloved. It is revealed to us that God's Beloved is actually God's Son – God became a loving Father, and had a beloved Son, to have someone that God could Love like that, someone to whom God could give a Gift like that – the Son of God's Love. That is what it is all about – almost.

This Love that God is, made God want to create – to create the universe and us in it. Love is the inner secret of what made God want to do that, to create us and gift us with the same Love God has for God. We don't exist except in that Love.

Naturally, we want to thank God for our very existence, and all else. We can do it. God enables us to do that. And when we do that, it is we ourselves who do it (not God doing it for us). God wanted someone who is not God to thank God for being such a Loving and Gifting God....

Even that isn't enough. It leads to a mutual love between us and God, to a bond of Love between us, to a consonance between us in one Love, and so to a Perfect and Full Joy. We and God can gasp together in the same Love.

Go back to what we were saying. God Loves God's Beloved Son, within God. There's a mutual love between them. There's a bond of Love between them, there's a consonance between them, and a Perfect and Full Joy. It's the same bond that there is between God and each of us.

But in God, there is a kind of 'breathing out' from God (the Father) to God (the Son) – and a 'breathing back' too – of one and the same Love. You could say that there is a 'Breathed Out-Breathed Back' Love they have and do together. The old Latin word for that is 'Spirit'. That is what 'Spirit' really means. So there's a 'Spirit' in God, between Father and Son. That's what we mean by the 'Holy Spirit'.

As a result, the Lover, the Beloved and the Love dance around together, and can't hold their Joy. It outflows into us.

Another result is that when we try to talk about God, we get it confused. That's ok – we are not here to talk but to love. But we tend to say that, for example, the Creator is God the Father, and then to say that no it is the Son, the Image of all Creation, or to say, that no, really, it's actually the Spirit of Love. It's all of them, we just don't have the language to say how. The Great Emptying-Outpouring made little emptyings-outpourings like us....

I sometimes feel that the word 'Love' might be good enough, perhaps better than Spirit.

Maybe the word 'Gift' gets closer....or Gasp gets closer still... Different words appeal to us in different moments.....

You can read texts from scripture, like John about Nicodemus and about the Paraclete, or like Paul in Romans 8, or 1 Cor 12, or Galatians 5, and they say it better than we can....

Perhaps we can never get the best words for God. But there is one thing we do know about God. God is not alone. God is a relator. [as a Jew once said, if God were alone, God would be a fool.] The great mystery about this God is: just as there is never one God without three persons, there is never that God without you. God cannot actually be God without the Trinity, and without you.

If we look back now on the whole festal season, it has been a revelation to us about Love, about this Love... The climax was Pentecost. And Pentecost reveals the Trinity.

III. Second reflection by Kevin O'Shea

My focus this year is not on what we believe about the Trinity, **but on the way we come to believe** in these three divine persons and in their oneness. We name what we believe very often. We don't pause to think about our way of believing it nearly enough.

I am going to suggest that it is the **same kind of way in which we see Jesus as risen** . [I prefer 'see' to 'know' in this context. In the gospel stories, from Mary Magdalen forward, the recipients of appearances 'saw' Jesus as risen.] That means that the way we see him is not intellectual knowledge but a form of deepened spiritual **perception**. It is in this strange way that we recognise him in our field of experience. And as a result, we see him and everything else in a different way. In his light. In lumine tuo videbimus lumen. In your light we see light.

As a kind of shorthand, I will say that this experience comes from what are called '**spiritual senses**'. That idea goes back to Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. Their ancient world had no trouble accepting 'spiritual senses'. Nowadays we don't say it like that very much. But, I suggest, we still do it.

It is a case of **using language differently from everyday**. Language is as good as its ability to '**refer**' to what it talks about. It refers to things, and especially to people, that we 'know' familiarly. Like family members. It is like living the picture, and knowing from the inside what it refers to and is all about. It is a different way of perceiving. It isn't a matter of argument or a case of resolving hesitation. You just know, you just see, you see. It is not, typically, a 'recognition of hard objects at five paces'. 'Reality' makes 'sense' only in the stream of life. It often subverts the 'normal' meaning of the words. It goes a different direction from 'legitimate' expectation. I am told that women who have

had children know it. I think men and women who have been very close to death and not died, know it too. Maybe children know it, better than any grown ups, maybe best of all..

Unde videtisne...and so you see....don't you....of course you do!

It is interesting to reflect that in the New Testament, there is a primacy of women's testimony in witnessing to the resurrection. Women, especially Magdalen, were the initial recipients of appearances. Their language afterwards was fragmentary, awe-struck, somewhat incoherent, with strong elements of fear of the previously unknown. But they had an unshakeable surety that Jesus is there, and risen. [Their voice was never regarded in Torah as convincing or reliable in a court case. But court cases are not the ultimate instance of reliability or reality anyway. They never could handle resurrection.]

Let me say it again, a bit more amply.

Origen of Alexandria (c.185 – c.254) admitted that he had come, after a long time, to a deep communion with the eternal Word – with the way that Word referred to things for which there could be no words ...and for which there are no obvious referents down the street. He tried to describe this in poetic and erotic terms taken from the Song of Songs. He went from there to try to say how he had come to 'know' the resurrection, or better, the person of the risen Jesus. It was like a transformed sense knowledge - like the sense knowledge of his own inner self. This, for him, was the only way in which the risen body of Jesus could be known. He could only describe it figuratively, using language from the physical senses. But he knew, I think, he was doing more than make up some more metaphors. He had seen. He knew.

I like **making 'sense'**. Right away. The gospel is not about a salvation that makes sense later, when we go to heaven. It is about the sense of salvation now, in the present economic culture. It is, to put it bluntly, the abolition of inequalities, and the sense of a communion of equals together now. That is what makes sense to us now! We sense the resurrection like that.

Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 – c.395) followed him, and said there was indeed a toe-hold for spiritual perception precisely in the physical. He said it was a dark ecstasy. I think it was an ecstasy, a standing out of ordinary living and ordinary language, but I am not so sure it was dark all the time. There is light in it too.

The core of this view is that there can be an **integration of the affective/poetic/erotic with the cognitive/inquisitive, in the self. The result is a new and different way of knowing....and seeing...and being.**

The narratives of the discovery of the resurrectedness of Jesus, in the gospels, show a

turn in the posture and attitude of the person involved. From head to heart. They do underscore the evidence of the heart. But unlike Origen and Gregory, it is almost instantaneous.

This way of approaching the resurrection did not continue in the Western church.....but some more recent thinkers have known it.

Among modern writers, **Wittgenstein** has looked at it. He talks about a different way of 'picturing'. There is a subliminally generated dimension in it. I would prefer to say it is beyond any picturing. He knew it threw light on religious experience, he sensed that religious experience was something like that, even if he honestly denied having much to do with religion himself! He never thought, as far as I know, of applying the idea to the resurrection of Jesus.

R.S.Thomas: 'Suddenly'

*As I had always known
He would come, un-announced,
Remarkable merely for the absence
Of clamour. So truth must appear
To the thinker; so, at a stage
Of the experiment, the answer
Must clearly emerge. I looked
At him, **not with the eye**
Only, but with the whole
Of my being, overflowing with
Him as a chalice would
With the sea. Yet was he
No more there than before,
His area occupied
By the unhaloed presences.
You could put your hand
In him without consciousness
Of his wounds. The gamblers
At the foot of the unnoticed
Cross went on with
Their dicing; yet the invisible
Garment for which they played
Was no longer at stake, but worn
By him in this risen existence.*

[Laboratories of the Spirit, 32]

Edwin Muir: 'The Transfiguration'

*So from the ground we felt that virtue branch
Through all our veins till we were whole, our wrists
As fresh and pure as water from a well,
Our hands made new to handle holy things.
The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed,
Till earth and light and water entering there
Gave back to us **the clear unfallen world.***

[The transfiguration, Oxford, 1960]

I owe these thoughts, and the references, to **Sarah Coakley.**

Perhaps I owe my readers an apology for not addressing the topic of the **Trinity** directly. It is – yes - Trinity Sunday! My excuse is that this different and spiritual way of seeing can help us – if it is not too much to say – see and understand the Trinity! There is of course a theological link between resurrection and Trinity. The latter is, over some early centuries, just one way of spelling out the implications of having seen the resurrection...

Last year (2013) for this Trinity feast, I tried to look at the Trinity of persons in God via the idea of **kenosis**. I came up with a Father and a Son who emptied themselves out into each other, in love, or better in a living gasp of love that was already emptied of any ‘solidity’ other than that emptying. **As I wrote then,**

The God of Jesus emptied his Godness into Jesus in love. Jesus emptied himself for the sake of the poor people he loved. Something made them do it. Paul calls it the Spirit. The Spirit of self-emptying. So in the real God there are indeed three: the self-emptied God (Father) and the self-emptied Jesus (Son) and the self-emptying mystery (Spirit). Call them persons if you like, as long as you mean persons who empty themselves in love for other such persons. If you see the trinity that way, you could say it is experiential, it is historical, it is a summary of the whole liturgy from advent to Pentecost. It is the point behind the incarnation and the death-resurrection. Where do you find this Trinitarian self-emptying? You do see it in some people around us. In married couples, in parents, in children also – they do it because they love one another. When they do it, God, the Three, are there in what they do and who they are.

If you believe in the Trinity, don’t go looking for the Trinity somewhere else. It’s here. Often unknown, but longing to be recognized.

I felt then it might be a case of **either you know this, or you don't!** But I want to probe further than that.. I am beginning to think that **'seeing' the Trinity in God is a bit like seeing risen life in the crucified....**as we were just thinking about....

I think perhaps that an experience of this kind is possible, and does happen if we allow it and recognise it. I can understand that some people might persist and say you can't prove the Trinity, it doesn't make sense, etc.... No you can't, and it actually doesn't make that kind of sense. It isn't in our logic. We don't have a trialectic to deal with it! But I wonder, just wonder, if there is (the gift of) **an intouchness with 'IT' that goes down the track of the spiritual senses of Origen and Gregory – the one that Wittgenstein has hinted at...and the poets have tried to remind us of....**

My hunch is that **we can 'hear' sometimes each of the persons speaking to us...and to one another.**
