

Trinity Sunday 2010

Genesis 1:1- 2:4a

Trinity Sunday puts me in a bit of a snit. It's difficult to find biblical passages which actually address Trinitarian concerns. So the folks who put the lectionary together just seem to grab passages where God is talked about as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whether or not the passage tells us anything about what we are talking about when we talk that way.

So, I'm going to begin by ignoring the Trinity. It's meaning was pretty well expressed in the hymn we just sang. If you'll look at its text, you'll get a good idea of what Trinitarian theology is about. (*Faith Renewed* Hope Publishing, 1995. #30 *When Minds and bodies meet as one . . .*) Words by Brian Wren, Music by Peter Cutts)

But first, let's look at Genesis. This seems an appropriate environment in which to look at the creation stories, being next to a technical school with a suspicion of scientific research about it. The question in our day is, how can we take seriously this creation story from Genesis? To interpret the first chapter of Genesis as if it's telling us something descriptive about the creation of the world would roughly be parallel to writing a scientific paper on the feeding habits of giant green sea anemones (*Anthopleura xanthogrammica*) in iambic pentameter. It is a confusion of the purposes of different kinds of literature. For instance, look at the structure of this passage. The first three events that God commands are events of separation. The light from the darkness, the waters above the dome from the waters beneath it, and the dry land from the waters. The next three events are events of generation. First separation, then generation and God finishes by taking a nap. This does not sound like an attempt at scientific description, but a work in which meaning depends on literary structure.

Besides, one needs to know a bit about ancient cultures. Look at the gods of Israel's neighbors. They are mother earth, father heaven, and the sea. Three entities that correspond to the first three days of creation. To the neighbors of the Hebrews they were not that which God makes, but divine in and of themselves. The Hebrew creation story squeezes divinity out of creation. To state that the one true God creates these things and that they are, if you will, results of his action and not divine beings, constitutes one of the points to the story. Without even using the word "monotheism," this story is its assertion, not a statement about how the physical world evolved.

Let me give you another example. On the fourth day God says, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky . . ." And then God spends an inordinate amount of time telling us what the purpose of these lights might be. To separate day from night. (A separation which, before electric lights, organized human life.) They are also signs for seasons, days and years. They tell time. "And let the lights of the dome of the sky give light upon the earth..." – so human beings can see what they are up to. And, of more interest to many, the lights allow us to see what other people are up to. Why all this talk, not about the process of making the lights, but about what they are **for**? Consider the neighborhood. To the ancient Babylonians what did the stars do? They controlled the destiny of earthly things. We still see this in horoscopes which, I note, are frequently placed on the comics pages of newspapers. (Where they belong.)

Stars were able to direct events on earth because they were living beings who could influence what happened here by exerting their wills. Like most living beings, their wills were shown by means of their movements. So one watched the patterns of the heavens to figure out the destiny of the earth-bound.

But notice – that kind of divine power is not mentioned in Genesis 1 among God’s purposes in the creation of the stars, the moon and the sun. What is mentioned is what we would call natural purposes: telling time, giving light to work, things like that. Again, an assertion that there is only one God calling the shots and a corresponding emptying of divinity from the elements of the creation themselves. The purpose of the first chapter of Genesis seems to be to talk about the proper quality of relationship between God and the created order. It is not to talk about the created order’s mode of origin. Proper relationship, not process of origin. Consequently, all this stuff about conflict between science and religion, and was the world created in seven days in whenever it was Archbishop Ussher said it was created -- 5005 or 5025 BC at 10 AM - - turns out to be a serious misunderstanding. Oddly enough, to interpret scripture as if there were such a conflict is to interpret it as a modern person, as a person not understanding the thoughts of scripture’s authors, who were more interested in detailing how relationships worked than they were in scientific origins.

OK. So that’s a bit about Genesis and a suggestion about how to interpret it.

There are other aspects to the interpretation of Genesis 1 besides the assertion of monotheism. One of them is to subtly hint at – I don’t want to say the ethical structure of the universe – but at the eschatology of ethics. This means setting aside the question: What sort of ethics do we need to live in the world? It means asking concerning the sort of ethics we would have were we living in the world as it ought to be. Never think that question irrelevant to a Christian. It’s hard to gather oneself and keep moving in a given direction if one doesn’t know where one is going.

So it’s not surprising that we human beings are occasionally stuck with an interim ethic that allows us to relate to the world as it is, while we’re also called to keep in mind a final ethic, pointing to the world as it ought to be. In Genesis, this final ethic shows up the statement, “And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” (Genesis 1:30) This is a world without killing and, by implication, without violence. That’s not the practical ethic of ordinary life. It’s a reminder of the final and ultimate desire of God. You see the same kind of thing in Isaiah when he reflects on the nature of heaven, “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord . . .” “. . . the lion shall eat straw like the ox. . . and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.” (Isaiah 11) In line with a proper Christian humility it’s good to reflect that neither we as individuals or our society can be successful in fulfilling the whole intention of God. God will always intend more good than we can execute. It’s useful to remember that sometimes the ideal is not possible for us. Nevertheless it remains the true ideal and our lives are impoverished if we don’t know of it.

That's a second use of Genesis 1: The presentation of the uttermost ethic of God.

There's a third use, unfortunately it has been buried behind some very forced interpretation of the text. It has to do with the purpose of human beings. In the passage: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the face of the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

This has been used to justify all kinds of things. The only problem with seeing it as a grant of authority to human beings is that the word translated "dominion" refers to the power to help something realize its possibilities. This is not a grant of authority to take beavers and turn them into felt hats. It's only a grant of authority to help beavers be beavers. In other words, the function of human beings in relation to the creation is to help creation continue to be what God created it to be in the first place -- not to make it into something else.

It is frequently interpreted as a bestowal of unbridled power. This interpretation impress me as terribly self-serving. I know plenty of three year olds who would dearly love permission to do whatever they pleased. The idea that this passage gives mankind the right to direct the fate of the earth is really a grant to human beings to do what they want. I simply cannot understand how reasonable people can think like that. Within the Christian tradition of sacrificial living, discipline, communal responsibility and respect for the acts of God shown in creation of the natural order, it is unthinkable. It doesn't fit either a sense of common morality or a close reading of the biblical text. In this case, two strikes and you're out.

Before I quit, a little word on understanding the Trinity. The difficulty in understanding the Trinity is that it's formulated according to perfectly good Neoplatonic precepts. In this congregation we're a little short on Neoplatonic philosophers, which may have something to do with why the doctrine doesn't make too much sense.

I have a tee-shirt with an immensely complex mathematical formula on it. Beneath the equation is the legend, "What part of . . . do you not understand?" The answer is, all of it, because it's in the wrong language. The same thing is true of Trinitarian doctrine. It's expressed in an archaic, practically extinct, philosophical language. I think Brian Wren's hymn, the one we just sang, gets about as close to the root as one can get in ordinary English. The nature of God is communal. God does not consist of a hard, permanently shaped lump of separate being. The being of God consists of a network of interactive relationships. In fact, I sometimes grit my teeth because ordinary Trinitarian language tends to say that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit as if each one were a lump of separate being. A much more careful, and I expect correct, way to interpret it would be God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the action of each relating to the other. It is an assertion that the nature of God **is** dynamic relationship.

I don't find this too hard to understand. If I try to reduce myself to a static thing, I find that there's not much left in which to be interested. The interest, the life, the possibility of loving and receiving love, all lie in the movement, the interaction, the relatedness and relating. This is what the doctrine of the Trinity, I think, is about. God's inner life is not static, it's like ordinary human inner life. It is constantly moving, changing, relating. And yet, the temptation, because we are told to think of God as perfect, is to think of God as static because we think of perfection

as static. If that were true, my parents would have related to me in the same way when I was twenty as when I was two. Which would hardly have been a display of competent, much less perfect parenting.

Perfection depends on being able to shift, being able to move, being able to change. This is also true for the capacity to love. Do not be trapped into thinking that one must always love another in the same way. This is not to be loving, but to be psychotic.

And there have been times in the history of Christian theology when we have been close to ascribing psychotic behavior to divine being. One of those times is when we confine God by making God static and incapable, at least in our theology, of a flexible response to the creation. (Another has been when we believed God took joy in the death of our enemies.)

So the Trinity, if you want an avenue of approach to it, is an attempt to assert, on a somewhat awkward philosophical foundation, the liveliness, the movement, the responsiveness, the shifting connection, of divine being. It does this by saying that God is liveliness, movement, responsiveness, not just to the creation outside of himself, but to the elements of his own nature which constitute his inner life. This is the business about the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The idea of responsiveness, of movement, of dynamic being, is not just a kind of frosting which can be spread onto a static basic nature of God. But how God relates to the creation in his responsiveness and movement is a reflection of the core inner nature of divine being in as far as that can be known.

Now you have my rough summary thoughts on the Trinity and I think that's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.

NOTE:

I'll be at summer school during the rest of June and all of July. Since I'll be studying rather than preaching there will be no sermons for a couple of months.

So be relieved. Enjoy your freedom from the homiletic snowstorm.

It's time (and probably past it) I was filled rather than emptied, received rather than gave, was taught rather than taught.

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