

Trinity Sunday 2013

Romans 5.1-5

John 16.12-15

Today we are going to go on a theological rollercoaster, so brace yourselves, strap your selves in and get ready to go. It is Trinity Sunday, so the theology is going to be rich – not completely obscure as is the popular myth, not abstruse and irrelevant – far from it: the doctrine of the Trinity is the prism through which we can understand all of existence and its meaning. It is not metaphysical mumbo-jumbo – it is life and love, what it means to be a person, what our ultimate destiny is, and how to enjoy life to the full. So we will start and end with the Trinity, we will descend into the exciting but difficult and unnerving waters of our human sexuality. We will even swerve past the dangerous area of same-sex relationships and then we will curve round to consider on this our Stewardship Sunday our use of money and what we give. We may find the ride a bit nervewracking and as we will be touching areas that go deep into us, it may be that there are things here you'd like to talk to me about. Please do – you can nobble me afterwards.

I want to begin with what someone has been described as 'the best pages written about sexuality in the twentieth century'.

'It manages to say,' he goes on, 'not only what sexuality is for, but what marriage is for, what celibacy is for, and what Christianity is for.'

The essay is called *The Body's Grace*. It was written by Rowan Williams. Like most things written by our former archbishop it is so nuanced that it has to be read several times to extract the full flavour of what he is saying. I must confess that there are things he has written that I have read several times and still felt as I do with some steaks that I my chewing has not actually aided one jot in the meat's digestion. But this one is not like that. It is worth the effort, believe me. It's available online at http://www.igreens.org.uk/bodys_grace.htm.

Here are some edited highlights. Tighten your seatbelts, hold on to the safety bar and here we go:

Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.

The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.

The life of the Christian community has as its rationale — if not invariably its practical reality — the task of teaching us [that, to teach us] to so order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.

... To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned, or are learning, about being the object of the causeless, loving delight of God, being the object of God's love for God through incorporation into the community of God's Spirit and the taking-on of the identity of God's Child. It is

because of our need to keep that perspective clear before us that the community needs some who are called beyond or aside from the ordinary patterns of sexual relation to put their identities directly into the hands of God in the single life ...

Back to me, or rather back to Jesus in John's gospel, the Jesus who speaks of his union with the Father: he and the Father are one, he abides in the Father, the Father abides in him, and he calls his disciples to participate in that love, to abide in his love as he abides in the Father's love.

Let's just unpack that for a moment. What does it mean? It means that Jesus's sense of himself, who he is and what he is for comes from knowing that he is loved. He has a relationship with the one he calls Father, a relationship that transcends space and time, and he invites us to share in that love, to know that we are loved, that what gives us our true identity is not what we look like, what our job is, what we're good at – though those things may rightly be important to us. What gives us our truest identity is that we are loved. Most of us experience that love through the mediated form of human relationships: the love of human parents, friendships, partners, but all of those human loves, wonderful though they are, are but a foretaste of that Love that transcends all of them. Those called to the celibate or single life are a great gift to the rest of us because in the affairs of love, as it were, they go straight to the top and, as Rowan puts it, 'put their identities directly into the hands of God'.

But for those of us who 'are formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another', we experience the body's grace. That is, we learn to love one another with our bodies, to learn in the rhythm of giving and receiving bodily that the truest ecstasy is to be enjoyed when our desire is focussed on giving and not receiving. Some of the mystical writers, such as Theresa of Avila, speak of their relationship with Christ in ways that border on the erotic and you can look at that in two ways: it could be that they are sublimating their human sexuality through their religious experience. That would be to say that human sexuality is the real thing and religion is just a substitute for it. But there's another way of looking at it: that communion with God is the real thing and that human sexuality is as it were a sacrament of it, a human, bodily sign of the greater invisible grace.

We call sexual activity love-making because at its best sexual union floods the hearts of the couple, swells them, overwhelms them with love. This is the body's grace, a sacrament of what St Paul speaks of in our NT reading:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.
(Romans 5.5)

When we are united with Christ we are swept into the embrace of the eternal love of God, that mutual giving and receiving that flows and pulses between the Father and the Son. That energy of love and union we call the Holy Spirit, and that understanding of the Holy Trinity was developed in the Western tradition by St Augustine. Notice incidentally that this Scriptural and classical understanding of the Trinity is expressed as a same-sex union. I leave you to ponder that one when such things have been in the news this week, but our rollercoaster is going to avoid running straight into that difficult territory and lurch in a different direction.

Augustine saw the Father and the Son both as givers and the Spirit as gift: the Spirit is the eternal gift of the Father to the Son and vice versa, that flowing and pulsing of love one to another in which we

are invited to participate: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'

So the Holy Spirit is love and the Holy Spirit is gift. Which brings us to Stewardship Sunday. We are Christians because we have been loved, loved by God into existence, loved by God into salvation, the forgiveness of our sins and the new life of the Spirit. We gather as Christians to express our love for God in return. We love because he first loved us. Worship is the giving and receiving of love as we offer our thanks and praise and he offers us through word and through bread and wine his gifts, the body's grace, the body being the body of Christ.

But part of our response is also the giving of our money. I don't want you to give because you feel guilty or bullied into it by the vicar nagging on about it. I want people to give because it is the natural response of an open heart, a response of love to the God who has loved us abundantly. Jesus said 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'. I really believe that. We see that in the transformation of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. He discovers that there are more blessings in giving than receiving, that opening one's heart – and wallet – to others is a blessing to us. As the gift flows out of us we find ourselves receiving more back than we gave – such is the flowing and pulsing of love and of grace.

There are envelopes at the back of church for those of you who might be considered church members. There will probably be one with your name on it. Please collect it today and consider your response. If you believe that you have received much then please give according to your means and as a loving response to God's grace.