

Learning from the Trinity:
Mysterious Simplicity
I Corinthians 2:7-17

Sermon

Hobart, March 13th, 2011

Devonport, March 19th, 2011

Launceston, March 20th, 2011

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OLD TESTAMENT READING:

Isaiah 40:12-15,18-20, 25-30

¹²Who else has held the oceans in his hand? Who has measured off the heavens with his fingers? Who else knows the weight of the earth or has weighed out the mountains and the hills? ¹³Who is able to advise the Spirit of the LORD? Who knows enough to be his teacher or counselor? ¹⁴Has the LORD ever needed anyone's advice? Does he need instruction about what is good or what is best? ¹⁵No, for all the nations of the world are nothing in comparison with him. They are but a drop in the bucket, dust on the scales. He picks up the islands as though they had no weight at all.

v18 To whom, then, can we compare God? What image might we find to resemble him? ¹⁹Can he be compared to an idol formed in a mold, overlaid with gold, and decorated with silver chains? ²⁰Or is a poor person's wooden idol better? Can God be compared to an idol that must be placed on a stand so it won't fall down?

v25 "To whom will you compare me? Who is my equal?" asks the Holy One. ²⁶Look up into the heavens. Who created all the stars? He brings them out one after another, calling each by its name. And he counts them to see that none are lost or have strayed away.

²⁷O Israel, how can you say the LORD does not see your troubles? How can you say God refuses to hear your case? ²⁸Have you never heard or understood? Don't you know that the LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth? He never grows faint or weary. No one can measure the depths of his understanding. ²⁹He gives power to those who are tired and worn out; he offers strength to the weak. ³⁰Even youths will become exhausted, and young men will give up. ³¹But those who wait on the LORD will find new strength. They will fly high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.¹

¹*Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. 1997, c1996 (electronic ed.) (Is 40:29). Wheaton: Tyndale House.

I Corinthians 2:1-16

Dear brothers and sisters, when I first came to you I didn't use lofty words and brilliant ideas to tell you God's [mystery].^{*} ² For I decided to concentrate only on Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. ³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. I did not use wise and persuasive speeches, but the Holy Spirit was powerful among you. ⁵ I did this so that you might trust the power of God rather than human wisdom.

⁶ Yet when I am among mature Christians, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world, and not the kind that appeals to the rulers of this world, who are being brought to nothing. ⁷ No, the wisdom we speak of is the secret wisdom of God,^{*} which was hidden in former times, though he made it for our benefit before the world began. ⁸ But the rulers of this world have not understood it; if they had, they would never have crucified our glorious Lord. ⁹ That is what the Scriptures mean when they say,

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
and no mind has imagined
what God has prepared
for those who love him.”^{*}

¹⁰ But we know these things because God has revealed them to us by his Spirit, and his Spirit searches out everything and shows us even God's deep secrets. ¹¹ No one can know what anyone else is really thinking except that person alone, and no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit.

¹² And God has actually given us his Spirit (not the world's spirit) so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us. ¹³ When we tell you this, we do not use words of human wisdom. We speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit's words to explain spiritual truths.^{*} ¹⁴ But people who aren't Christians can't understand these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them because only those who have the Spirit can understand what the Spirit means. ¹⁵ We who have the Spirit understand these things, but others can't understand us at all. ¹⁶ How could they? For,

“Who can know what the Lord is thinking?
Who can give him counsel?”^{*}

But we can understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ.²

^{*} *I Corinthians 2:1* Greek *mystery*; other manuscripts read *testimony*.

^{*} *I Corinthians 2:7* Greek *we speak God's wisdom in a mystery*.

^{*} *I Corinthians 2:9* Isa 64:4.

^{*} *I Corinthians 2:13* Or *explaining spiritual truths in spiritual language, or explaining spiritual truths to spiritual people*.

^{*} *I Corinthians 2:16* Isa 40:13.

² *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. 1997. c1996 (electronic ed.) (1 Co 2:1). Wheaton: Tyndale House.

INTRODUCTION:

I. THE TRINITY

A. THE LAST FEW MONTHS

1. We have been looking at lessons we learn from the Trinity, from the life and relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit
 - a) We have talked about *koinonia*, fellowship, community, sharing caring
 - b) About Joyful intimacy, peace and friendship
 - c) And about Sacrificial loving and giving
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S.P.S:

A. TODAY WE ARE LOOKING AT SOME MORE ABSTRACT, BUT VITALLY IMPORTANT LESSONS

1. Lessons we have learned slowly, sometimes painfully, but hopefully indelibly over the years
2. Lessons that bring great wisdom and balance to our lives, and to the work of Christ and his gospel message we are called
 - a) to understand, to live and to share³

B. PRAYER

³ to share in, and share out

BODY:

II. THREE VITAL PRINCIPLES EMERGE FROM THINKING ABOUT THE TRINITY

A. EACH ONE OF THESE RELATED CONCEPTS ARE FOUNDATIONAL FOR:

1. the way we view life and the world around us,
2. and the truth and the life we are to live and share with others

B. THREE PRINCIPLES:

1. Mystery
2. Paradox
3. Simplicity

III. MYSTERY:

A. HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPLAIN GOD?

1. How do we explain how God is THREE, yet one God?

B. WE TRY TO EXPLAIN HIM IN TERMS WE UNDERSTAND

1. Like water; that exists in three forms, water, steam and ice
 - a) But it only exists in one form at a time, not all three at once
2. Or as a person who is a son, a father and a husband
 - a) But these are still just one person with three different roles
3. But God won't fit any description or analogy

Isaiah 40:18-20

^{v18}To whom, then, can we compare God? What image might we find to resemble him? ¹⁹Can he be compared to an idol formed in a mold, overlaid with gold, and decorated with silver chains? ²⁰Or is a poor person's wooden idol better? Can God be compared to an idol that must be placed on a stand so it won't fall down?

- a) God exists in dimensions beyond time and space

(1) He is far greater and far beyond our human minds to contain or define, far beyond things on earth, or human language, science or mathematics to reveal or define

C. THE SCRIPTURES REVEAL THERE IS ONE GOD, BUT THREE PERSONS,

1. What we call the holy Trinity
2. Three in one, One in three
3. But how can anything be three in one, and one in three?

D. MYSTERY:

1. Some of our breakaway groups make a big issue about the Trinity being a mystery, and thus they figure it, must be untrue
2. But it is a mystery, beyond our natural minds
 - a) a mystery that God reveals, rather than a puzzle we have to vainly seek to solve.
3. And the Scriptures often emphasise that the wondrous nature, love, wisdom, power and plans of God are a mystery
 - a) But not a mystery that is completely hidden, one that is revealed more and more to those who trust in him
4. God does not keep us in the dark about himself, but gives us increasingly more light about him
 - a) Paul writes about this in I Corinthians 2:

I Corinthians 2:7-16

⁷ No, the wisdom we speak of is the secret wisdom of God,^{*} [Greek "we speak God's wisdom in a mystery] which was hidden in former times, though he made it for our benefit before the world began.

⁸ But the rulers of this world have not understood it; if they had, they would never have crucified our glorious Lord. ⁹ That is what the Scriptures mean when they say,

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard,

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what God has prepared

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^{*} I Corinthians 2:7 Greek we speak God's wisdom in a mystery.

^{*} I Corinthians 2:9 Isa 64:4.

¹⁰ But we know these things because God has revealed them to us by his Spirit, and his Spirit searches out everything and shows us even God's deep secrets.

¹¹ No one can know what anyone else is really thinking except that person alone, and no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit. ¹² And God has actually given us his Spirit (not the world's spirit) so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.

¹³ When we tell you this, we do not use words of human wisdom. We speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit's words to explain spiritual truths.*

¹⁴ But people who aren't Christians can't understand these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them because only those who have the Spirit can understand what the Spirit means. ¹⁵ We who have the Spirit understand these things, but others can't understand us at all. ¹⁶ How could they? For,

"Who can know what the Lord is thinking?

Who can give him counsel?"*

But we can understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ.

5. God lives beyond time and space, in dimensions we cannot comprehend

- a) But he does reveal clear and vital truths about himself that through his Spirit, we can grow to understand more and more

E. UNDERSTANDING THE TRINITY IS A CHALLENGE CHRISTIANS HAVE GRAPPLED WITH SINCE THE FIRST CENTURY

- 1. Important to recognise and appreciate the hundreds of years of study and struggle that went into defining a correct view of the nature of God**
- 2. The church prayerfully and humbly sought to protect the Christian teaching about God from heresy**
 - a) Wanted to make clear what is true and what is not true, about God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- 3. There is a severe lack of humility involved when individuals or groups quickly dismiss these teachings and replace them with their own ideas,**

* *1 Corinthians 2:13* Or explaining spiritual truths in spiritual language, or explaining spiritual truths to spiritual people.

* *1 Corinthians 2:16* Isa 40:13.

- a) which all end up being much the same errors as those the early church worked through and dismissed as heretical

F. OVERALL THERE ARE TWO MAIN ERRORS:

1. **One is emphasising the ONENESS of God over the THREENESS**
 - a) ie; ideas such as the Mormons, Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses and most Churches of God, that there is only one God, and that Jesus and/or the Holy Spirit in one way aren't God, aren't equal to the Father etc.
 - (1) WHAT do you think the second error is?
2. **Emphasising the THREENESS of God over the ONENESS**
 - a) This overemphasises the independence of the THREE, and denies in one way or another that they are truly ONE
3. **It is important to be aware that the church councils never claimed to fully and exhaustively define or comprehend God**
 - a) what they did do was make clear what is clearly revealed to be true, and on contrarily;
 - b) what is clearly not true about God

G. LEARNING ABOUT THE MYSTERY OF THE TRIUNE NATURE OF GOD KEEPS US HUMBLE

1. **What sort of God would God be if we could easily and simply define and understand him, fully and comprehensively**
 2. **We will always have more to learn and appreciate about the Trinity. It is a never ending journey of learning and inspiring discovery.**
 - a) **And all our contemplating the mystery of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Spirit leads us, not to consternation and confusion, not into darkness and despondency;**
 - (1) but into admiration, reverence, inspiration, light and joy
 3. **Importantly our study of the Trinity should not be confined to academic theory**
 - a) **It should lead us into real life, relational experience of and participation in the Triune life of God,**
 - b) **Who blesses every aspect of our lives with every aspect of his**
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IV. SECOND CONCEPT THE TRINITY TEACHES US IS *PARADOX*

A. GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

1. His ways are almost always opposite, inside out and upside down to the way we think and live
2. The Trinity, God in three persons, one, yet three; does not fit our human paradigms and thinking
 - a) Which is why even some religious people reject the Trinity
3. The way God lives, demonstrated by Jesus life as one of us; is paradoxical to the way of human beings;
 - a) It is the way of giving rather than getting;
 - b) The way of sacrificing, surrendering, giving up, forgiving,
 - c) of dying to bring life
4. God's ways don't fit with the way we assume life works best

B. CONTEMPLATING GOD AS A TRINITY REMINDS US TO LOOK AT LIFE THROUGH GOD'S EYES

1. To study it through the life and teachings of Jesus, the Son of God
2. To let the Holy Spirit give us spiritual eyes to see To look below the surface, beyond the physical, the self-oriented perspective we naturally see things through

I Corinthians 2:9-17

⁹ That is what the Scriptures mean when they say,

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard,

and no mind has imagined

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¹⁰ But we know these things because God has revealed them to us by his Spirit, and his Spirit searches out everything and shows us even God's deep secrets.

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"Who can know what the Lord is thinking?

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C. POLARISATION

1. One of the biggest problems in human thinking, including amongst too many of us Christians, is polarisation, going to extremes, only seeing one side of a matter

a) God is One, but it is also true that God is three

(1) But as we saw earlier, many tend to focus on one aspect of the truth to the detriment of the other

b) There is a big debate at the moment on God's love vs. God's wrath

(1) something we have talked about before, and will probably look at again soon

c) Some focus on who we are in Christ now, and our calling to be lights to the world by serving those around us today, on being God's people and kingdom today

(1) others feel all the emphasis should go on preaching about prophecy and the coming kingdom

2. But there is a great danger in black and white, polarized thinking like this

a) Paul continually battled for what has been termed the "radical middle"

(1) He talked about the importance of living our lives as lights of the kingdom today,

(2) but also living in the light of the full future realisation of the kingdom at Christ's return

* *I Corinthians 2:13* Or explaining spiritual truths in spiritual language, or explaining spiritual truths to spiritual people.

* *I Corinthians 2:16* Isa 40:13.

- b) He emphasised being led by the Holy Spirit, as well as planning, leading and keeping order in the church
- c) Stephen Seamands challenges us;

Have you learned to live in the radical middle in relation to the paradox of the bipolar nature of the church? Or do you operated from an institutionalistic or spiritualistic paradigm?

The doctrine of the Trinity, with its seem logical contradiction that God is one being in three persons, invites ...us... not to resolve the tension but to live with paradox and chart our course toward the radical middle.⁴

- 3. **Maturity is being able to understand and live in the light of two sides of the truth on these and many other issues**
 - a) not getting polarised to one side to the neglect of the other

V. SIMPLICITY

A. THIS LEADS TO THE FINAL POINT; SIMPLICITY

- 1. **One of my favourite sayings is from Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.;**

"I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity; I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the far side of complexity"

- 2. **It is all too common to jump to seemingly simple, blanket assumptions about God, and his ways**

- a) e.g., That God is really a family of two or three separate beings whose oneness is the way they live in perfect unity
 - (1) or he is really just one being, with three aspects to his personality
 - (2) or that only the Father is really God, and that Jesus was a created being, or that the Holy Spirit is an essence, and not a person
- b) That the Old Testament is still in force, or that you should ignore it entirely
- c) That God created the world in 7 literal 24 hour days or the Bible can't be trusted
- d) That all prophecy is for now and the immediate future, or that it is all fulfilled

⁴ Stephen Seamands, Ministry in the Image of God, p.111

- e) That if someone commits and outward sin they should be barred from attending church
- f) That if you have enough faith, God will always do what you ask of him, and therefore if you aren't full of joy and health then you must not have enough faith etc.

3. God, the Scriptures, prophecy and faith are all a lot deeper and more complex than these simplistic conclusions assume

B. AS STEPHEN SEAMNDS POINTS OUT:

nothing is so simple that it's not also complex, and nothing is so complex that it' not also simple. There is a complex simplicity and a simple complexity built into the nature of things.

There has always been a temptation to evade complexity in ministry by reducing it to formulas, programs, technologies and quick fixes. Moses succumbed to it...when he struck the rock... Jesus resisted the temptation when Satan urged him to instantly prove he was the Son of God by jumping down from the pinnacle of the temple (Matthew 4:5-7).

I'll never forget the tearful sharing of a forty-year-old man in a Sunday school class. When he was thirteen years old, his beloved elderly grandfather was critically ill. For days the boy prayed earnestly that God would heal him. Eventually, however, his grandfather died, and the boy began to grieve deeply. Unfortunately, his pastor made him feel even worse. "If you had only had faith," he said emphatically, "God would have healed your grandfather."

What deadly fruit his pastor's simplistic understanding of faith in healing had borne in this man's life. ... As the Alfred North Whitehead puts it, "The only simplicity to be trusted is the simplicity to be found on the far side of complexity."

Ministry therefore cannot be reduced to sound bites, programs, technologies, tidy formulas and quick fixes.

...Our pragmatic age wants to reduce everything to function and technology; the three-in-one unity of the Trinity warns us that it's not that simple. In ministry, nothing is so simple it's not also complex.

At the same time, nothing is so complex that it's not also simple. The antidote to "simplistic simplicity" in ministry... is not a complex complexity in which everything is tenuous, ambiguous and unsettled. Recognising that

we don't have all the answers doesn't mean we never have *any*. ...There is a simplicity on the far side of complexity.

...For over 125 years the church critically wrestled with various issues related to the person of Christ. ...It was a long, drawn-out process. The orthodox understanding of the person of Christ wasn't arrived at overnight.

Yet when the whole church family finally affirmed the definitive Chalcedonian Creed in 451, it could be summed up in one simple sentence: Jesus Christ is truly God, truly human and truly one. What had seemed at times so elusive and complex had become simple again. And because it was a simplicity arrived at on the far side of complexity, in its richness, power and depth it has stood the test of time.⁵

CONCLUSION:

A. TO SIMPLIFY THE COMPLEXITY OF THE MESSAGE TODAY;

1. Seeing and knowing God as the Trinity, reminds us that everything isn't as we tend to assume it to be
2. The Trinity is a mystery, a paradox, a simplicity on the other side of complexity

B. A PUNCH IN THE NOSE IS A CLASSIC SIMPLISTIC RESPONSE TO A COMPLEX LIFE SITUATION

1. It is simplicity on the wrong side of complexity

C. TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK,

1. loving patience and compassion are simplicity on the other side of complexity
2. The fruits of the flesh express the human tendency to rush to selfish simplistic solutions to the complex problems and challenges of life

⁵ Stephen Seamands, p.112-115

a) Men especially tend to anger, force and violence in response to difficult situations that they find overwhelming or threatening⁶

3. Fruits of the Spirit, like love, patience, peace, gentleness and self-control take into account the various complexities of the situations in life we so often face

D. GOD IS SIMPLICITY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF COMPLEXITY;

1. His way of love is simplicity on the other side of complexity

2. Love overcomes fearful, selfish, impatient and emotional responses to life's complexities

3. Love is patient, kind, longsuffering, self-sacrificing;

a) it listens, it thinks things through, it is not quick to jump to conclusions or to judge and condemn

4. The truths of God are also simplicity on the other side of complexity

a) as we have seen with the doctrine of the Trinity itself, and so many other doctrines we have had to dig more deeply into

b) Yet after working our way through each of them, we have found, hopefully, a simpler more robust, inspiring and freeing truths

(1) that fit beautifully and easily into who God is, and his loving will for us all

E. CHALLENGE:

1. I'd like to challenge each of us to think about an area in our lives

a) in which we tend to jump to simplistic conclusions or actions

2. or in our thinking

a) where perhaps we haven't really thought through, or been humble enough to hear both sides of an issue

F. PHILOSOPHER PAUL RICOUER SAYS:

1. There is a childish, uncritical first naïveté that we need to outgrow.

⁶ Women can also use selfish shortcuts to get their own way, but tend to be better able to take into account the complexities of relationship problems

2. To move beyond it we must be prepared to take a second look and question our assumptions
3. To humbly realize our naivete and see the reality and true complexity of a matter
 - a) As the Proverbs warn us, it is all too easy to believe the first thing we hear on a subject
4. Through taking time to humbly listen to God and the lead of his Spirit, we can be led to an understanding on the far side of the complex realities of a matter, a truth or a relationship situating, which is truly childlike, yet mature, rather than simplistic, immature and childish
5. T.S Elliot sums it up in a verse;

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

6. As Paul puts it;

¹⁰ But we know these things because God has revealed them to us by his Spirit, and his Spirit searches out everything and shows us even God's deep secrets.

¹¹ No one can know what anyone else is really thinking except that person alone, and no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit. ¹² And God has actually given us his Spirit (not the world's spirit) so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.

G. LET US TAKE PAUL'S ADVICE TO THE CORINTHIANS, AND SEEK GOD'S HELP THROUGH HIS SPIRIT

1. to know more fully the wonderful truths, the mysteries, paradoxes, the simplicity on the other side of complexity
2. to live and participate more fully in the wonderful life the Father, Son and Holy Spirit freely share with us

H. PRAYER
