

Some time ago I came across a word I had never encountered before – the word 'koan'. It's a word from Zen Buddhism. Apparently teachers of Zen Buddhism challenge their students with koans to stimulate their spiritual development. Koans are small, impenetrable questions which are designed to frustrate the logical mind so that deeper understanding can take place. In fact 'understanding' may be the wrong word. When a koan really gets to work, the result is more an experience than an understanding. One famous Zen koan is, 'What was the appearance of your face before your parents were born?' Another is, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'

Students of Christianity have some koans of their own. Many of Jesus' parables belong to that category, as do sayings such as 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' One of the toughest koans is, of course, the Trinity. How can God be both three and one at one and the same time? The doctrine of the Trinity is, without doubt, the mother of all logic-busters. There are Christians who doggedly retain a rock-solid belief in this apparent conundrum – while there are others whose belief in the Trinity resembles more a wobbling soufflé – in other words, ready to collapse! Their minds, their reason and logic are teased, taxed and tantalized by the apparent contradiction at the heart of this doctrine. How can God be three and one at one and the same time?

And yet the doctrine of the Trinity was not conjured up by cloistered theologians as the mother of all theological riddles, designed to baffle and perplex the ordinary punter in the pew. In fact it arose out of an attempt to make sense of God as the early Christians had experienced Him. These early Christians had come to know and experience God in three different ways. They had always acknowledged the God above and beyond them – God in terms of his majestic otherness and awesome holiness, before whom the angels veil their faces – a God whose light is brighter than a thousand suns, a God who balances whole universes on his fingertips, a God who holds in the hollow of his hands the destiny of men and nations. But then their whole idea of God had been turned upside down and inside out: their minds had been stretched to breaking point to produce new models by which to think of God. And it all had to do with a wandering rabbi called Jesus. Into the lives of people believing that God is one and all alone and ever more shall be so, came Jesus of Nazareth, healing the broken bodies and splintered minds of men and women, dying on a cross and rising again. The conclusion they eventually reached was, namely, this – God is Christlike and in him is no unChristlikeness at all.' Like Father, like Son – like Son, like Father. The conclusion these early Christians reached was that Jesus was none other than the down-to-earth version of God – the God who stripped himself of all the trappings of divinity and became a man, reaching down to the bottom of the pit of human experience that He might reclaim us and raise us to his level. But that was far from the end of the matter. On the Day of Pentecost they found themselves gripped and energized by a power greater than themselves. This for them was again God in action – God the Holy Spirit – not just resembling the wild wind of the desert but personal dynamic power – fashioning extraordinary saints out of ordinary human stuff, moulding them into a

unique community by demolishing the iron curtains of life that alienate and divide. What evolved as the Trinity, then, was rooted and grounded in how these early Christians experienced the mystery that is God. At the same time they knew that any attempt to understand the Trinity would simply result in the human brain blowing a fuse. Better then to try and enter into the mystery that is God, to experience the mystery, to adore the mystery, to absorb the mystery, or even be absorbed by it – by the presence, the grace, the love, the beauty of the mystery. Once St Augustine was walking along the beach pondering the mystery of the Trinity. There's a pastime for you the next time you are down at Island Bay!! He noticed a child carrying water in a pot and pouring it into a nearby pool. 'Whatever are you doing?' asked the saint. 'I want to pour the whole water of the ocean into my pool,' announced the child. Laughing, the saint exclaimed, "You'll never manage that.' The child stood up and said, 'I am doing exactly what you are doing. Do you think, with your puny understanding, that you will be able to fathom the mystery of the Trinity?' Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! That precocious child was at least aware of a God whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

In one of his books Robert Farrar Capon says that when human beings try to describe God we are like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina. We simply do not have the equipment to understand something so utterly above and beyond us, but that has never stopped us from trying.

Down through the centuries believers have tried to describe God, but very few ever come near to being satisfied with their descriptions. Their words turn out to be hopelessly inadequate, too frail and fragile to do the job. They cannot paint a true portrait of God, because creatures cannot capture the essence of their Creator any better than a bed of oysters can dance Swan Lake – but what if the ballerina condescends to become an oyster! Be that as it may, the best any of us has ever been able to do is to describe what the experience of God is like – how it sounds, how it feels, how it tastes, how it smells, what it reminds us of. Some days God comes as a judge, walking through our lives wearing white gloves and exposing all the messes we have made. Other days God comes as a shepherd, fending off our enemies and feeding us by hand. Some days God comes as a whirlwind who blows all our certainties away. Other days God comes as a brooding hen who hides us under the shelter of her wings. Some days God comes as a dazzling monarch and other days as a silent mud-caked servant. If we were to name the variety of ways God comes to us, the list would be endless: God the teacher, the challenger, the helper, the stranger: God the lover, the adversary, the yes, the no. God is many – which is at least one of the mysteries behind the doctrine of the Trinity. In making that statement of faith we are saying that God comes to us in all sorts of ways, as different from one another as they can be. The other mystery is that God is one. There cannot both be a fierce God and a loving one, a God of the Old Testament and a God of the New. When we experience God in, apparently, contradictory ways, that is our problem, not God's. We cannot solve it by driving wedges into the divine nature. All we can do is decide whether or not to open ourselves up to a God whose freedom and creativity and imagination simply boggle our minds.

Preachers tie themselves into knots trying to explain what all this means. Some explain that the Trinity is like a three leaf clover. Others point to H₂O in its three incarnations as water, ice and steam. One preacher latched on to the slogan, or battle-cry, of the Three Musketeers – 'All for one and one for three.' All I know for sure is that if human beings are created in the image of God, then (a) God is wonderfully diverse and (b) we are much more alike than we think.

Meanwhile I do not know why, as preachers, we should hold ourselves responsible for trying to explain things that defy explanation. Perhaps the best sermon on the Trinity is one that sniffs around the outermost edges of the mystery, hunting for something closer to an experience than an understanding. What, for instance, is the sound of three hands clapping?