

This time of year students everywhere are finishing up exams, so here is the true story of what might be considered the exam question from hell. **"Prove or disprove the existence of God"** in ten pages. Sounds tough but one clever answer used less than a page, and got top marks for the effort. The student wrote to the effect that the assignment was not possible using the rules of logical proof. For in using the standard scientific method, we would only be able to use the things that can be observed and verified by human senses within the known created world. All one could do, the argument supposed, in that instance is prove that something in the created world was God. In other words, you could only try to prove that something was God that could not possibly be God. The second part of the argument suggested that in order for such a "proof" to be valid, a student would have to be objective, from the start, about that answer. A student would need not to care if there was or was not a "God". Since everyone has a stake in the answer, one way or another, it was reasoned that such a proof was impossible to attempt.

The point of the exercise was to get the students to think about who or what God is. The clever student in question realized that we cannot approach the answer simply through logical thought, through reason alone. Now this is not to say that reason and logic do not have their place in the realm of faith. It is just to say that they alone cannot do the job. The reality of God is just too different from our experience to be able to fathom. So the complex theological language of the Trinity serves mostly to humble us.

There are probably a number of people who imagine that the idea of the Trinity was thought up by ivory-tower theologians who, typically, were making things more complicated than they needed to be; out of touch intellectuals who seem to relish obscuring the simple faith of regular believers. In fact, it seems that the process worked pretty much the other way around.

Practicing believers were driven by their experiences of God's activity to the awareness that God related in several different ways to the creation. And those differences were not just a matter of our limited perception. Thus what these believers came to insist upon was that God had to be recognized as being in different forms of relationship with the creation, in ways sort of like different persons, and that all these ways were divine, that is, were of God. Yet there could not be three gods. Our experience and our scriptures insisted that God is one. This complex and profound faith was then handed over for the theologians to try and make more intelligible. They have been trying ever since.

Like the Moslems and the Jews we claim that there is only one god. Like the Jews we have experienced that god with such richness that we find the word god needs to be stretched. The old testament spoke of the **wisdom** of God somehow working within creation and the **spirit** of God that touched and lead the prophets.

The Fathers of the Church preferred to use examples to explain the Trinity. They said: Look at a tree if you want to try to understand God. There is the root, the trunk and the fruit. The root is like God the Father, invisible but you know it's there, the trunk is like God the son, sent forth by the Father, visible and tangible, the branches and fruit is like the Holy Spirit. We are connected to Christ through the Spirit dwelling in us and by the power of the Spirit we bear fruit in the world.

Or look at a stream: the water rises from a source, but usually that source is hidden, the source of the stream is like God the Father, the stream which we can see and touch is like God the Son, visible because it flows from the one who sends Him, but the water as it flows into the fields, irrigating the plants and giving them life, allowing them to bring forth a harvest is like the Holy Spirit.

Or look at the light. The light comes from the sun, the source of light, but we see the light most clearly when it pierces through the clouds as a sunbeam.

When we are sitting in a room and the light shines in and touches us, we are warmed and can feel the light. So, the sun is like the Father, the beam like the Son and the warmth like the Holy Spirit. What each of these illustrations has in common is that they are all analogies, God isn't the tree or the stream or the light but like them. All our language about God can only hint at the reality and we never grasp or contain God in any one image. What we have in the Trinity, after all, is not a description of God, so much as shorthand for the unfolding story of God's love.

God knows that we cannot comprehend the fullness of being that is God. Instead God acts within our history and within our experience. God's story goes beyond metaphor to a God who acts with us and for us in Jesus. It is a story of Jesus love and obedience to the one he called "Abba" using the Aramaic word for "Father" not to reinforce a male stereotype, but instead to use the intimate language of a loving child for his daddy. Jesus promises that he and his Abba will send forth the Spirit of truth, to guide us and teach us along the way. It is this story of Jesus, his Abba, and their Spirit that form the foundation of the Trinity that we worship today. Understood outside of the context of this loving God breaking into our existence we would have no Trinity at all. To paraphrase, God is as God does.

But in the context of God's loving action in the world, the Trinity describes a God with characteristics that go far beyond our knowledge and sight: a God who gives his life for his creation; a God who uses love, not force, to change that creation from within; a God whose Spirit moved through that creation from before the dawn of time, and moves through that creation now; a God that is not observing us from a distance, but is present and active in all of life; a God that does not exist only in the powerful and the beautiful things of this world, but also in the weak, the outcast, the ugly and the failed things. The Trinity is the story of an unexpected God, in relationship with us in unexpected places and unexpected ways.

There is great wisdom in the writer who once said, "Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle. You try to solve the puzzle; you stand in awe before a mystery."