

Trinity Sunday, 2021

Karl Ove Knausgaard, the Norwegian author, best known for his six-volume opus, *My Struggle* answering a question about balancing the writer's duty to truth and the individual's right to privacy said, "If I could have written about my life and nobody else's I would have. But I couldn't because my life consists of other people and I have been writing about them." His answer implies that he can only truly write about himself, about his life, by writing about others as well. Knausgaard like all of us is a person in relationship. To be a person in the fullest sense is to be aware of and accepting of being a person in relationship. If you have read only one of the six volumes that make up *My Struggle* you will understand why the question is an important one, as is the answer. Knausgaard goes on to say that writing allows for topics to be raised and addressed more widely than the public will sometimes allow, such as bullying, mental health, alcoholism and one's relation to one's parents in his case especially his father.

"If I could write about my life and nobody else's I would have. But I couldn't because my life consists of other people." This telling statement by Knausgaard about his writing is a key to unlock a door and to go through on this Trinity Sunday. What insight, can we say truth, is Knausgaard articulating? Simply we are people in relationship. We are people who can encourage one another, grow with one another, enable one another. There is another side. We are people in relationship who can hinder each other. Hurt one another. "No man is an island" in the famous words of John Donne. We are people in relationship.

An early Jewish insight captured in Scripture and foundational to our understanding of ourselves is that we human beings are persons made in the image of God. Fearfully and wondrously made as the Psalmist can sing. To be in relationship is a fundamental characteristic of what it means to be made in the image of God, to be human. We can describe these relationships in hundreds of different ways. Speaking of myself I am a husband to, I am a father to, a son to, a brother to, a friend to, a neighbour to, a Chaplain to, a treasurer to, a mentor to, a confidant to, a fellow Christian to. Being made in the image of God, we are always in relationship to someone or something. I am client to, a consumer to, a citizen to... But let's turn these human relationships around and we find a wife, children, parents, siblings, friends, neighbours, parishioners, an organisation, a nation state, a client, a mentee, and other Christians. There is the other. There is the Gegenüber! There is reciprocity.

Relationship is foundational to our understanding of ourselves as made in the image of God as being persons in community. I am not talking about the quality of these relationships, that is another matter, but simply that they exist, that they are. They define us. You can deny the relationships as they pertain to you. Pretend that they do not exist. That they do not endure even when we retreat from them and God forbid deny. At Christ Church through our emphasis on creation, the environment and our response to the ecological challenges of the present we are becoming hopefully more aware of our lives being intertwined and dependent on the whole of creation. I am not a tree hugger, but amongst the photos on my phone that I have taken during the plague there are a number of trees caught in a particular light, or against a particular

skyline or at a particular time of the year. There is a haunting beauty to a bare tree stripped of its leaves in the height of winter. For us as Christians we are first and foremost to be understood as beings in our relationship to God by which all our other relationships are defined and understood namely those to creation and those to other human beings. As a baby and as a child our primary relationships will be to our parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, their friends and their children. These can lay the foundation for the new relationships into which we are to grow. Again I am not speaking about the quality of these relationships, but rather that we are made in the image of God, people in relationship, whether we like it or not.

This insight that we are made in the image of God allows for a reverse imagining, a bottom up imagining, which finds expression in our understanding of God as Trinity. You can see that there is something deeply relational about a God who makes himself known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Again we are made in the image of God. What does it mean to be made in the image of God? It is to be in relationship. This leads me to say that God is intrinsically in relationship and therefore dynamic and not “only” static. We speak of a living God, not a God of concepts, although concepts can and will be helpful, as we seek to grow in our understanding of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, who addressed God as Abba and invited us to do the same, who promised the Advocate. We speak of a loving God. And an essential aspect of love is that it requires the other, which brings us back to the I/you and the I/thou of which Martin Buber wrote and of which Gabe spoke a few Sundays back. As a hopefully humorous aside do you remember the Tarzan films starring Johnny Weissmuller, which has him saying, Me Tarzan! You Jane!

This window into God, God in and of Himself, is made possible by understanding ourselves as made in the image of God and coupled with Knausgaard’s self-evident but helpful comment that we can only tell our story by fully embracing that our lives do consist of other people, that we are embedded in creation, in which we live, embracing Christians and peoples of other faiths, all creatures great and small of the God who gives and sustains life. The God who gives and takes away. The above encourages me to draw a picture of God that I find helpful with all its shortcomings, as we embrace God as Trinity on this Trinity Sunday, as three in one and one in three. I already touched on God not to be thought of, or imagined as the sum total of a collection of attributes, or being only static. As if God were some sort of lifeless lump or immovable solitude. Up there! Out of reach! Remember the cry of the prophets about the worship of idols that have no life in them? Do we do the same with God, I wonder? “They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell.” Is this the God we imagine? A God with no life in self and therefore with no life to impart. God as Trinity helps me to see that God in and of self is life. That God is not only the source of life, but rather that God is life in self. In the words of Psalmist who sings, “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.” (Psalm 36.9)

The above is leading to something fundamental about God as we celebrate God as Trinity on this Trinity Sunday, three in one and one in three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is in and of self relational. To be relational, God has no need of *us*. We as part of God’s creation do not complete God in any way, although God does delight in his creation. Again God is in and of self

relational and therefore community. A perfect community as expressed in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For me given that we speak of God as a living and loving God I have developed two pictures. You may find them helpful possibly not, but I pray that these faltering musings about something as ineffable as the Trinity will unlock a door that we can go through making it possible for each and every one of us to open ourselves to God as Trinity, as a fruit of God's making himself known and in the continuing experience of those who follow in each generation.

The first one comes from preparing couples for marriage. A component of Christian marriage is the desire to have and nurture children. During the time of preparation for the great day I often pray with the couple giving thanks that the love the couple have for each other is deep enough for them to make a lifelong commitment to one another. But for love to complete itself there must be the shared love of the couple whose reference extends beyond themselves – for example in the love of a child or a shared faith or a shared concern for righteousness and justice or the right stewardship of God's creation or in the building up of a local Christian congregation. The love of the couple is to unite in such a way that it might extend itself beyond being a mutual appreciation club. The point of this picture, as incomplete as it is, serves to remind ourselves that love gives fully of itself. It is extravagant. It empties itself. Love uniting and giving lavishly of itself in the service of others is a picture inspired by thinking of God in and of self as love, as Trinity.

Finally, God understood as being relational in him/herself, God as community, as Father, Son and Spirit, this picture invites me to see God as abundant self-emptying and self-giving love. The love of which I speak in awe and wonder is defined by the Love that creates a cosmos forever stretching our imagining, the Love that comes down at Christmas, the Love that hangs from the tree, the Love that lavishes itself on the followers of Jesus by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Christians understand God's love as a love that is always self-giving as it gives itself for the world. The Father lavishes his love on the Son, who lavishes his love on the Holy Spirit, who lavish their mutual love in a cycle of never ending, eternal, self-emptying love and in the self-emptying ready and willing to be filled again. God as triune, as I contemplate this matter too wonderful for me (Psalm 131.1), is an unending, eternal cycle of giving and receiving and it is into this circle of love that we are drawn by the completing (atoning) love of God or as expressed in the Athanasian Creed, who takes our humanity into God. This too is the mystery of faith.