

Into All Truth

a sermon preached on the

Feast of the Holy Trinity

30 May 2010

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 Romans 5:1-5 John 16:12-15

There is a famous encounter between the legendary and household name of Albert Einstein and a completely unknown (except to professionals) Belgian priest named Georges LeMaître. By the time they met Einstein was now the great authority on all matters to do with quantum theory and cosmology. Einstein had become famously committed to his static-state model of the universe. Indeed, he was so committed to his model of the universe that he even felt it necessary to invent something called the 'cosmological constant' in order to make the equations work. Later he is said to have regarded this as the greatest blunder of his life. However, while Einstein was still committed to a static universe the first proponent of an expanding cosmos was in fact the young Belgian priest LeMaître. When he first had the opportunity to meet Einstein, keen to receive some support from the great man, Einstein summarily dismissed him, allegedly declaring: "Your math is correct, but your physics is abominable." One gets the impression that Einstein had forgotten his own beginnings – his early work so threatened the established scientific paradigm of the time that it was initially ridiculed.

This story reminds us that even the greatest of genius scientists cannot escape the inertia of their humanity. Even those ostensibly dedicated to an unfettered quest for knowledge are capable of becoming overly-attached to their models and equations – so much so that once their ideas become established, and they become 'famous', they can become as aggressively resistant to new development as those who they had to fight to get a hearing when they themselves began. I suppose the same phenomena can be observed in every discipline, every facet of life.

On this feast day the gospel reminds us that this is also true of the religious quest. "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth."¹ Whatever truth we may have grasped in relation to God, it is but a fragment of the whole truth. Our tradition has always known this, of course – as have all the great religious traditions. But our certainty always seems to take centre stage. And, like all religious tradition, and like all human developments, progress is built both on novelty as well as on hard-won settlements and agreements.

Science calls such collective agreements 'paradigms'. Religion calls them 'doctrines'. And we cannot do without them. Jettisoning doctrines is as foolish and dangerous as imagining that we can do without scientific paradigms. And even a glance around is sufficient to reveal the great mass of people who, having concluded the doctrines unnecessary, are without root or ground – tossed hither and thither by every passing marketing campaign, fad, and consumable package. The triumph of what is loosely known as Christian orthodoxy, thrashed out at councils of the church during the fourth and fifth centuries especially, is a tremendous edifice of systematising without doubt. Politically, economically and culturally it has been the basis for an astonishing concentrating of energies and astounding accomplishments spanning many centuries. It has been like the reactor core for Western civilisation.

¹ John 16:12-13a

But Jesus' declaration in this sixteenth chapter of John is like a time-bomb waiting to go off at an unexpected moment. For every claim to have found the final and absolute truth, the perfect doctrinal equation, the most precise or beautiful model, is interrogated and found wanting by Jesus' declaration: "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." We simply cannot bear all the truth and survive the encounter - just as the Hebrews had long ago realised that a human cannot see the face of God and live.

This is both sobering and liberating. Sobering because all our certainty about doctrinal formulations or models for God is but a mirage. That, certainly, is a sobering realisation for we humans, so needing some certainty, something we can rely upon in a shifting and threatening world. Sobering because all our certainty is swept away by the tsunami of the Divine inscrutability.

But, if we can recover from our shock - and remember that we are human, and laugh at our insecurity and anxiety -s it is also liberating. The religious formulas and models which have given us valuable shelter from the stormy world thus far, good though they may be, are not capable of saving us. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." The liberation we seek is the work of the Spirit who leads us into all truth - the Spirit who reveals yet more truth than can ever be contained in even the very best of our religious formulas and models. "The Spirit will... take what [belongs to the Son, which has been given by the Father] and declare it to you."²

This sacred meal is always an invitation to be open to that deeper and fuller truth which the Spirit who is coming is revealing. Just as in that great 14th century icon of the Trinity, by Andrei Rublev, there is a curious little window to apparently-nowhere just beneath the three seated Divine figures.

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