

TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN?

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Jesus said to his disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." (John 16:12)

One of the great minds of the late 20th and early 21st centuries belonged to Stephen Hawking, the British cosmologist and theoretical physicist. For most of his adult life until his death in 2018 Hawking suffered from ALS. But from his wheelchair he was able to write numerous books about the big questions of science in a way the public could understand. He addressed such matters as the existence of life beyond Earth, whether or not time travel were possible, and the very structure of the universe. These were three different approaches to the one question of our ultimate reality.

Concerning alien life, Hawking warned that we should be extremely careful about broadcasting our existence to the universe. History proves that things would not go well for us if a technologically superior civilization were to come by for a visit. Concerning time travel, he once devised a test to see if it were possible. His plan was to host a party at his college for authentic time travelers. But to ensure that no pretenders crashed the event, he only sent out the invitations the day after the party was over. On the day of the party, he sat and waited, but no one came. Hawking reports that he was disappointed, but not surprised!¹

Concerning the structure of the universe, he began his most popular book, A Brief History of Time, with an amusing story. A noted scientist was once giving an elementary lecture on astronomy. He explained how the earth orbits around the sun, and that the sun is one of billions of stars that all make up the galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady stood up and announced, "What you have told us is rubbish! The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior chuckle and asked, "What is the tortoise standing on?" The woman replied, "You're very clever, young man, very clever. But it's turtles all the way down!" Hawking doesn't say in his book, but my guess is that that pretty much ended the lecture.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Ever since medieval times that church has set aside a Sunday to celebrate something people honestly have a difficult time celebrating. Today we highlight not an event in the life of Jesus – neither his birth, death, resurrection, ascension, nor anything in between – but instead a doctrine called the Trinity. The Trinity is the church's teaching about the nature of God. It states that the one living and true God exists in three Persons who are all of the same Substance. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. Yet they are not three gods, but One God. God is "three in one" and "one in three" we say. And it's right about now – right at this moment on Trinity Sunday every year – when you look at me as if I am proposing that the structure of the universe is actually an infinite tower of tortoises. "It's turtles all the way down," is what I might just as well be saying.

You wonder where we get such ideas. Likewise, the famous professor might have pressed on with questions for his questioner. How did you come to believe such an idea? Have you ever seen the giant tortoise? Did you read about it in a comparative mythology course? Is it part of your family lore – something your elders told you was true from your earliest days? In such a way the world might question us, and we might question ourselves. Where do we get an idea like the Doctrine of the Trinity? Here it is important to make sure we keep the horse before the cart. All Christian doctrine begins with the experience of God. God reveals or discloses to humankind the different ways he is present for us, and then we spend centuries trying to process what it all might mean. Over time, what emerges from our experience of God is our doctrine of God.

So the key question for Trinity Sunday might simply be this: what has been your experience of God? All of us have experienced God, whether we know it or not. Perhaps for you it begins with the wonder of creation, the mystery beyond us. The creation itself bespeaks a Creator. The beauty and complexity of the creation simply cannot be uncaused. It isn't good enough to say that the creation came to be through the laws of nature, and the laws of nature keep it all going. What are the laws of nature standing on? Who devised them? It makes no sense to say it's the laws of nature all the way down. Indeed, the nature of the universe points to a Mind as the Source of all being. This is God the Father: God the Almighty, God in the First Person of the Trinity. We experience God as much, much greater than we are: one so powerful as to be the creator of the stable earth, the deep salt sea, the universe around us, and all things visible and invisible.

Until the days of Jesus, people had always known of, or at least suspected the existence of God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity. But then along came Jesus, and the impact of his life, death, and resurrection was so unnervingly wonderful that it was almost back to the drawing board concerning God. They searched the Scriptures for any clue as to who Jesus might have been. Interestingly, one of the passages they keyed in on was today's reading from Proverbs (8:1-4, 22-31) about the Wisdom of God. In these lines they saw Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity. They searched their memories for what Jesus said about himself in relation to God, particularly his words at the last supper on the night before he died – part of which we heard in today's reading from John (16:12-15). In time those who had experienced Jesus became certain that God himself had visited them in this individual. Indeed, the mystery among them was God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, of one Being with the Father, begotten not made. His essence and substance, his thoughts and feelings were exactly those of God. God was knowable through Jesus, and no words of praise were too high for him.

It didn't end there. Soon after Jesus came the Day of Pentecost, when God's Holy Spirit visited people, and filled them with such new life that they could only conclude that here was yet a third unique visitation of divinity. Here was a mystery within them, the Third Person of the Trinity. That same Spirit of God, which is the Spirit of Christ, visits us still today. So which is God? Or are all three God? But if all three are God, how could God be One, as Jesus and Moses and the prophets had taught? One of the most succinct and helpful explanations of the Trinity I've come across belongs to the theologian Frederick Beuchner, who writes, "*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery.*"²

Perhaps we could call it a successful Trinity Sunday right there and get on with other activities, most especially the Parish Picnic. "That pretty much ends the sermon," we could declare in concert with Jesus, who said, "*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.*" Well, I still have many things to say to you, but I'm going to risk that you can bear hearing them. I should warn you that Jesus went on for another chapter and a half even after he signaled that he was about to stop. But I will attempt to be more sparing with my words. So allow me, if you can bear it, to tease out some implications of the Trinity.

The Trinity proposes not a nonsensical picture at the heart of reality, but the presence of perfect community. God's life is one of eternal fellowship and companionship. God is not a force. God is not a law. God is personal. Within God is a circle of love, a society of giving and receiving. The three members of the Trinity have eternally depended on and loved each other. God has never been alone. We are not meant to be alone. So the best analogy for the Trinity is caring for and loving another person, and having such love returned with an equal intensity. Being present for others, and having presence returned creates a wonderful, living picture of the Trinity, far better than equilateral triangles and three-leaf clovers. Another way of saying the same thing is: God is love, and where true love is, God himself is there. Turtles all the way down? No, it is love all the way down. The love of God.

A second implication of the Trinity emerges from the first. If God is love, then God's life is dynamic, not static. God is "*unresting, unhasting, and silent as light.*" Love seeks a beloved, and is therefore always on the move outward. God made his goodness and love known in the creation, in the calling of Israel, in the Word spoken through the prophets, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus. The purpose of God's work, God's whole campaign is us – you, and me, and all of humankind. God wants to draw us completely into the circle of love that is himself, and give us a share in the life he enjoys. *What is man that you should be mindful of him?* the Psalmist (8:5) asked of God? The answer is quite amazing. God wants us to share in his eternal life of perfect love and fellowship. Today's readings from John and Romans (5:1-5) both affirm, in a round-about way, the notion that God's dynamic will is to draw us into the perfect community of his divine life. God is dynamic. As for the question of other life beyond Earth, of course we don't know. But it's easy to imagine that conscious life has emerged somewhere else in all the vast times and spaces of the universe. If so, and if the doctrine of the Trinity is true, then God who is the maker of all things visible and invisible is mindful of them, too.

Finally, a third implication of the Trinity (you didn't expect any fewer or any more than three on Trinity Sunday, did you?). If the Trinity is true, then God is free from the limitations of time and space. Suffice to say, playing fast and loose with the boundaries of time isn't for us mortals. Though we are pressed and pulled to be in more than one place *at the same time*, we cannot disobey the laws of physics. Try as we might, being two places at once is impossible, thus we are unable to be present with people as we desire. But time travel is entirely possible for God, because God stands outside of time. God is able to show up at every party and attend to every prayer simultaneously because time itself is a creation of God. Indeed, today's reading from Proverbs speaks of a time before time, affirming that God is the author of time and space, and thus is completely free to transcend these parameters. God existed before *the beginning*. God could be fully present in Jesus, and fully present in heaven, *both at the same time!* Our minds go on overload when we try to conceive of an existence outside the limits of time and space. But such freedom is what the doctrine of the Trinity ascribes to God.

There you have three implications teased out of the doctrine of the Trinity: God is love, God is dynamic, and God is eternal. Have we solved the mystery of being and existence? I think it's safe to say that we have barely scratched the surface in comprehending the nature of God. Remember, *Jesus said to his disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."* We haven't run out of things to say. On the contrary, we have far too much to say than any one lifetime can accomplish.

One of the greatest thinkers and theologians of the late 4th and early 5th centuries was St. Augustine of Hippo. In the closing lines of his massive work, The City of God, Augustine dared to imagine the day when finally we would understand, when finally we would meet God face to face. Anticipating what he called the "eighth day" of creation, he wrote:

There we shall be still and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold, what will be in the end, without end! For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end?

For now, we see through a glass darkly. Now we see through doctrines, Word, Wisdom, Sacraments, art, music, poetry, science. But on the eighth day of creation we shall see face-to-face our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend – who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: one God, world without end.

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¹ Stephen Hawking, Brief Answers to the Big Questions. Bantam Books, 2018, p. 141.

² Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC. HarperCollins, 1973.