

**“By Love But Not By Thought”**

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**Introduction**

The 6<sup>th</sup> century Athanasian Creed begins...

*“Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith... And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity... The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.”*

Trinity – one God, existing in three persons and one substance.

It’s a teaching at the very heart of Christian faith. But... *what on earth* are we talking about here?

Dorothy Sayers, 20<sup>th</sup> century English novelist, comically said,

*“The Father, incomprehensible;  
The Son, incomprehensible;  
The Holy Spirit, incomprehensible;  
... the whole damn thing **incomprehensible!**”*

And most of us would agree with her. It **is** impossible to get your head around! It’s one, but it’s three, but it’s one...

And if we’re ever forced to put our mind to it... as *might* happen on this one Sunday of the year... most of us feel nothing but confusion... it’s incomprehensible.

But... what if that’s its intention?

What if the theological formulation we call *the Trinity*, is designed to defeat our egoic temptation to grasp GOD, to intellectually master the LORD?

***The Incomprehensible God***

The Jewish faith, from which we come, was passionately convinced that we should never try to limit or contain God in any way... whether that be by the work of our hands (in idols)... by language (even God's name was not to be spoken)... or by the exercise of our minds. To think we can ever master GOD with our rational intellect is a sin.

Indeed, to conceive of God as a 'being', that is, anything like our finite notion of 'being', is to fall into grave error... (blasphemy). When you do that, you've created an idol in your mind. Whereas the truth is... God is unknowable mystery... incomprehensible.

We inherited this Jewish conviction as Christians.

As the new Christian faith left its original harbour of Judaism, and spread throughout the Greco-Roman world, pagan people, used to the pantheon of many gods, were naturally inclined to think of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as *three gods*.

So, the doctrine of the Trinity was crucial in saying... '*No, we're talking about one God here.*'

And it was designed to stop people thinking of God as a supernatural being, in the way they would think of Zeus or Jupiter.

Trinity was designed to scramble the rational containing mind, by forcing it to hold what is a *rational absurdity* – one as three... as one... as three... but really one... and yet at the same time three...

The doctrine of the Trinity made it impossible to *think* of God as a being... that is, a larger, more powerful, perfected version of us.

God's nothing like us. (We are like God, but God's nothing like us.)

The Trinity says, '*No, we're exploring a very different reality here!*'

So, you can *pray* the Trinity... you can *meditate* on the Trinity... but you'll never pin this God down by the exercise of your finite rational mind. You can be informed by the theology of Trinity... you can be carried to new insight by the Trinity... but at the end of the day, the only option is to bow down before God in worship.

### **The Invitation**

So, now we can all relax... knowing that 'not getting it' means we're actually on track... and we can turn to an important question...

Intellectual endeavour is an essential dimension of the Christian faith.

And there are all manner of insights flowing from the quite wonderful contemporary theological explorations of Trinity, that fill several shelves in any quality Christian bookstore.

But today's sermon follows the mystical path, asking instead... 'How does the theology of Trinity invite us to **experience** GOD? How do we approach this GOD who is unknowable mystery, and yet who calls us into relationship with Him/Her... this incomprehensible GOD who paradoxically yearns to be known?'

What's the experience we're being invited into here?

### ***The Cloud of Unknowing***

There are literally hundreds (probably thousands) of writings from the Christian contemplative tradition that I could turn to here... but today... a personal favourite, from the 14<sup>th</sup> century English work, "*The Cloud of Unknowing*."

The anonymous monk, who is the book's author, writes in dialogue with a 'seeker', saying...

*"But now you put me a question and say, 'How might I think of (GOD) in himself? And what is he?'*

*And to this I can only answer thus, I have no idea.*

*For with your question, you have brought me into that same darkness, into that same cloud of unknowing, where I would you were yourself.*

*For a man may by grace, have the fullness of knowledge of all other creatures and their works, yes, and of the works of God's own self, and he is well able to reflect on them.*

*But no man can think of God himself.*

*Therefore, it is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think.*

*Because (GOD) can certainly be loved but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought."*

(PAUSE)

*“God can be loved but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought.”*

### ***Love As Another Way of Knowing***<sup>i</sup>

We shouldn't make the mistake of thinking in terms of a sentimental or romantic idea of love here. That's not what's being said...

The author of the Cloud is saying, that love is another way of knowing. A deeper way of knowing.

It is knowing not through the intellect but through relationship.

This is a way of knowledge that only occurs when there's personal investment of ourselves in the act of knowing the other.

It is a loving engagement with the other – whether that be another person, with a pet, with a garden, a tree, or with GOD – (it is a loving engagement with the other) that doesn't seek to contain the other in the certainties of our mind, but rather desires to appreciate and connect with the other in their ineffable uniqueness... their mystery.

We know this in our deepest human relationships... and so it is with GOD.

It is this union, this interconnectedness, that Trinity invites us into.

The theology of Trinity says that GOD is not in any way a separated being... (as we mistakenly believe that we are).

No, GOD is a unity, a circle of LOVE... a community of LOVE... which encompasses all creation, all life... including you and me.

We are called/invited into that experience... that relationship...

Into the mystery of GOD... the mystery of each other... all the world... and life itself.

Everything is ONE.

Everything is LOVE.

Everything is gathered into GOD.

My head can't handle that, but my heart... indeed my soul... says YES... and I know it's true!

My head can't contain it or master it... but I CAN live there... in the beauty and the mystery of it.

## Conclusion

We'll sit in silence for a bit now...

In the silence we can sit *in* the experience and know its truth.

And if we allowed it, the rest of the Eucharist could flow in this awareness of mystery.

But then the liturgy tells us to stand and recite the Creed... and the spell is broken... and we're back in that headspace of words, concepts and rational belief.

All the agonies of our generation... *'Do I believe that or not? Can I really ascribe to all that stuff, much of which I don't understand?*

I wouldn't bother going there myself.

It may help to know that the Latin, *Credo*, which we translate as "*I believe*"... also carries the sense of "*I give my heart to*". Once upon a time in Christian liturgy, we didn't *say* the Creed very often, and when we did, we more than likely sang it.

That's where I go...

I'm in the midst of a love song here... a love song that the incomprehensible trinitarian GOD is singing... and I'm trying to join in... or even better, totally lose myself in it.

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<sup>i</sup> This material draws on Jason Smith's podcast, "*Digital Jung*", 'Knowing Not Knowing', May 3, 2021