

Feast of the Most Holy Trinity (Year C)2016
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, published a book last year which I believe is a very important work for our world. “*Not in God's Name*” examines how evil can be perpetrated in the name of good – he uses the phrase 'altruistic evil' to describe this all-too-frequent phenomenon; how religion, so often blamed for much of the world's troubles, strife and wars, is actually vastly more often a force, and a necessary force, for good; and interprets the stories of the Book of Genesis to suggest a way in which people of good will from the three great monotheistic faiths can enter into conversation on equal terms.

God, he demonstrates, chooses but never rejects. God's choices are impossible to fathom, but that is God's business; but when God chooses, unlike his human creatures, God never rejects the un-chosen, but affirms them.

Usually when we choose to love someone , we clearly less-love, sometimes to the extent of hating, those we have not chosen. As Jacob, tricked into marriage with Leah hated her because she was not his beloved Rachel; and as later Jacob, loving to extreme the child Joseph, whom Rachel eventually bore him in his old age, seemed to despise his ten older sons, whose resentment grew murderous. God chooses some but never rejects the un-chosen. So passive Isaac was chosen but Ishmael was also blessed. He too was the father of twelve sons. Jacob, the trickster, was the heir of promise but Esau was also the founder of a nation.

Sibling rivalry causes many upsets. The three monotheistic faiths, those who believe in a God who is One God: Jews, Christians and Muslims, all take their descent from Abraham. Jews and Christians from Isaac whose line would lead to David the king, and the Messiah, the Christ, was a descendant of David, which for Christians came about with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The people of Islam also call Abraham their father, though they believe their ancestor was his son born to the slave-girl Hagar, the desert-wanderer, Ishmael.

That we have a common ancestor should be a point of connection, conversation, perhaps cooperation. In recent times this has been the case between Jews and Catholics, since the decree of the Second Vatican Council “*Nostre Aetate*”, which rejected the idea, all too prevalent before that unequivocal statement, that all Jews were somehow guilty of Christ's execution and could be held responsible.

Relations with Islam continue to be patchy, intermittent, and partial.

A stumbling block to mutual understanding is the Christian understanding of God as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To the Jews this is incomprehensible. Their twice daily prayer implores, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord God is one God;and you shall

love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength.” (Dt 6,6-8). To the Muslims the notion of the Trinity is blasphemous. Allah is One, All-Mighty, All-Merciful. Not even Mohammed, the great prophet comes close. Jesus is recognised as a man close to God, a prophet. Jesus mother, Miriam, is revered. But, in Muslim belief, Jesus was not crucified and was not raised and was not divine.

We beg to differ. Jesus' divinity is explicitly stated in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God; and the Word was God” (Jn, 1,1-2); and Thomas at the climax to the Fourth Gospel declares, “My Lord and my God” (Jn.20,29). In the letters of Paul and in the other Gospels that truth is implicitly, though clearly, implied, even though the idea that a man could be God was absurd and ran against the world-view of Jews like Paul.

Eventually the Church would declare that Jesus was 'True God and true man; of one substance with the Father' as reflected in the Niceo-Constantinople Creed we say many Sundays in the Mass. And the Christian understanding of God would be that the One God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The earlier centuries of the Common Era were fractious as the Church worked out this truth. All the counter-arguments, and there were many, centred on the strong desire to maintain the Oneness of God, which erudite thinkers thought was imperilled by the idea that Jesus was part of the divinity or that the Holy Spirit was divine. This, they thought, gave us two or three gods.

The Church has always maintained that God is One, whilst also maintaining that there is a differentiation within God, which does not affect God's substantial unity.

Why is this important? Because, as the Fathers of the early Church stressed, if Jesus is not God, one with the Father in the Spirit, then he cannot save us; for only God can unite us to God. And if Jesus is not truly human, like us in all things but sin, then he cannot save us. For only what he has taken into himself, only what Christ has assumed, namely our human nature, can be saved.

The Holy Trinity is an impossible concept to get one's human head around. But, having taught a course on the Holy Trinity in seminary, I also know how fundamental this idea is to our faith. God, who is love, shares his life with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit, if we are willing to empty ourselves to reject worldly conceits: power, prestige, authority, as Jesus emptied himself to die the death of a slave.

It is an impressive ideal, which many will find impossible to grasp until we meet the Lord face to face. But as Sacks powerfully argues, with Scripture as his witness, God chooses, and though his choice is ever surprising, not least to those he selects, yet in choosing some God never rejects any. All are invited to come to God.