

Sarah Coakley (1951-), *Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity*

In this presentation, I want to lay before you three theses about the Trinity which have been much exercising me in my recent theological research, and which are, I believe, intertwined in a complex and fascinating way. They relate to what I see as the interlocked themes of the Trinity, prayer, and sexuality.

The first thesis is this: that the revival of a vibrant trinitarian conceptuality, *an 'earthed' sense of the meaningfulness and truth of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, most naturally arises out of a simultaneous renewal of commitment to prayer, and especially prayer of a relatively wordless kind.* I shall try to explain why I think this is so with special reference to Paul's discussion of the nature of Christian prayer in Romans 8 as 'sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8.26), instituted by the Holy Spirit; and how I think this Spirit-leading approach to the Trinity through prayer is the only experientially rooted one likely to provide some answer to the sceptical charge: why three persons' at all? Why believe in a trinitarian God in the first place? I shall be arguing that Christian prayer-practice is inherently trinitarian.

The second thesis goes on from this, and is perhaps a little more surprising; it is that *the close analysis of such prayer, and its implicitly trinitarian structure, makes the confrontation of a particular range of fundamental issues about sexuality unavoidable.* (Note that I use 'sexuality' in a wider sense than is often employed in North America— not restricting it to actual genital sexual activity.) The unavoidability of this confrontation seems to me to arise from the profound entanglement of our human sexual desires and our desire for God; and in any prayer of the sort in which we radically cede control to the Spirit there is an instant reminder of the close analogue between this ceding (to the trinitarian God), and the *ekstasis* of human sexual passion. Thus it is not a coincidence that intimate relationship is at the heart of both these matters. no renewed trinitarian spirituality can sidestep these profound issues of the nature of sexual desire.

My third thesis, then finally, is not so much a finished proposition, but a task in progress for us all. It is the task of *rethreading the strands of inherited tradition on these three matters in such a way that enacted sexual desire and desire for God are no longer seen in mutual enmity, as disjunctive alternatives, with the non-celibate woman or homosexual cast as the distractor from the divine goal.* Rather, we are seeking a renewed vision of divine desire (a trinitarian vision, I suggest) which may provide the guiding framework for a renewed theology of human sexuality—of godly sexual relations—rooted in, and analogously related to, trinitarian divine relations.

When we move to face the puzzling question of why perfect relationship in God was understood as triadic in the first place, I want to argue that an analysis of Christian prayer (especially relatively wordless contemplative or charismatic prayer) provides an acutely revealing matrix for explaining the origins of trinitarian reflection. Vital here is Paul's analysis of prayer in Romans 8, where he describes how, strictly speaking, we do not autonomously do the praying, for we do not even really know what to ask for; rather it is the 'Spirit' who prays in us to the ultimate source in God ('the Father', or 'Abba') and does so with 'sighs too deep for words' transcending normal human rationality. Into that ceaseless divine dialogue between Spirit and 'Father' the Christian

pray-er is thus caught up, and so transformed, becoming a co-heir with Christ and being fashioned into an extension of redeemed, incarnate life.

What is being described in Paul is one experience of an activity of prayer that is nonetheless ineluctably, though obscurely, triadic. It is one experience of God, but God as simultaneously (i) doing the praying in me, (ii) receiving that prayer, and (iii) in that exchange, consented to in me, inviting me into the Christic life of redeemed sonship. Or to put it another way: the 'Father' (so-called here) is both source and ultimate object of divine longing in us; the 'Spirit' is that irreducibly—though obscurely—distinct enabler and incorporator of that longing in creation—that which makes the creation divine; and the 'Son' is that divine and perfected creation, into whose life I, as pray-er, am caught up. As John of the Cross puts it in a lovely passage in *The Spiritual Canticle* (39.3.4), not coincidentally quoting Romans 8: 'the Holy Spirit raises the soul most sublimely with that His divine breath . . . that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father'.

The Spirit, on this view, note, is no redundant third, no hypostatized afterthought, no cooing 'feminine' adjunct to an established male household. Rather, experientially speaking, the Spirit is primary, just as Pentecost is primary for the church; and leaving non-cluttered space for the Spirit is the absolute precondition for the unimpeded flowing of this divine exchange in us, the 'breathing of the divine breath', as John of the Cross puts it.

Now what we want to know next is this (and it brings us to our second thesis): What happened to exegesis of Romans 8 in the critical early-patristic period? What I suggest here is that, from the second century on, there were both politico-ecclesiastical and gender reasons for keeping this approach to the Trinity away from the centre stage in the public conciliar discussions of the matter. For Paul's analysis of prayer in Romans 8 notably involves: (i) a certain loss of noetic control to the leading experiential force of the Spirit in the face of our weakness (8.26); (ii) an entry into a realm beyond words, beyond normal rationality or logos (*ibid.*); and (iii) the striking use of a (female) 'birth pangs' metaphor to describe the yearning of creation for its 'glorious liberty' (8.22). After Montanism (the prophetic and rigorist sectarian movement of the second century, ultimately condemned by Rome), it is not hard to see why any or all of these features could look less than attractive to developing mainstream 'orthodoxy', at least as a first basis for trinitarian reflection.

My third thesis, you remember, is the call to rethread the strands of tradition on divine and human desires such that they are no longer set in fundamental enmity with one another, no longer failing in their alignment. The first is the hypothesis that unless we have some sense of the implications of the trinitarian God's proto-erotic desire for us, then we can hardly begin to get rightly ordered our own erotic desires at the human level. Put another way, we need to turn Freud on his head. Instead of thinking of 'God' language as really being about sex (Freud's reductive ploy), we need to understand sex as really about God, and about the deep desire that we feel for God—the clue that is woven into our existence about the final and ultimate union that we seek. And it matters in this regard—or so I submit—that the God we desire is, in Godself, a desiring trinitarian God: the Spirit who longs for our response, who searches the hearts, and takes us to the divine source (the 'Father'), transforming us Christically as we are so taken. . . . The Spirit progressively 'breaks' sinful desires, *in and through* the passion of Christ.