

Untangling Donne's 'Knottie Trinitie'

Note: figures in round brackets, e.g., (1), indicate the numbering of passages discussed in the lecture.

[1] [T]hough in our *Doctrine* we keep up the Trinity aright; yet God knows, in our *Practise* we doe not. I hope it cannot be said of any of us, that he beleeves not the Trinity, but who amongst us thinkes of the Trinity, considers the Trinity? (*The Sermons of John Donne* (ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson; 10 vols; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-62); hereafter 'PS'), ix, 53)

[2] (1) God is not pleased, not satisfied, with our bare knowledge, that there is a God. For, *it is impossible to please God without faith* [marg. note: Heb 11:6]: and there is no such exercise of faith, in the knowledge of a God, but that reason and nature will bring a man to it... We exercise not faith, (and without faith it is not possible to please God) till we come to that, which is above nature, till we apprehend a Trinity. We know God, we beleeve in the Trinity... The root of all is God. But it is not the way to receive fruits, to dig to the root, but to reach to the boughs. I reach for my Creation to the Father, for my Redemption to the Sonne, for my sanctification to the holy Ghost: and so I make the knowledge of God, a Tree of life unto me; and not otherwise. (PS, ix, 52)

[3] [W]e can express God himselfe in no clearer termes ... then in saying we cannot expresse him. (PS, viii, 105)

[4] God gives audiences, and admits accesses in his solemn and publike and out-roomes, in his Ordinances: In his Cabinet, in his Bed-chamber, in his unrevealed purposes, wee must not presse upon him. (PS, v, 298)

[5] God calls not upon us, to be consider'd as God in himself, but as God towards us; not as he is in heaven, but as he works upon earth. (PS, i, 234)

[6] (2) Now these notions that we have of God, as a Father, as a Son, as a Holy Ghost, as a Spirit working in us, are so many handles by which we may take hold of God, and so many breasts, by which we may suck such a knowledge of God, as that by it wee may grow up into him. And as wee cannot take hold of a torch by the light, but by the staffe we may; so though we cannot take hold of God, as God, who is incomprehensible, and inapprehensible, yet as a Father, as a Son, as a Spirit, dwelling in us, we can. (PS, iii, 263)

[7] [W]e have not God, if we have him not, as he hath delivered himselfe; and he hath done that in the Scriptures; and we imbrace him, as we finde him there; and we finde him there to be one God in three Persons. (PS, v, 63)

[8] (3) Man was not only made *in verbo*, as the rest were, by speaking a word, but by a Consultation, by a Conference, by a Counsell, *faciamus hominem, let us make Man*; there is a more expresse manifestation of divers persons speaking together, of a concurrence of the Trinity; and not of a saying only, but a mutuall saying; not of a Proposition only, but of a Dialogue in the making of Man. (PS, i, 289)

[9] [W]hen man is made ... in that new Creation the Holy Ghost begins again, with a new moving upon the face of the waters in the Sacrament of Baptisme. (PS, ix, 93)

[10] (4) In this text is the first mention of this Third Person of the Trinity; And it is the first mention of any distinct Person in the God-head; In the first verse, there is an intimation of the Trinity, in that *Bara Elohim*, That *Gods*, Gods in the plurall are said to have made heaven, and earth;... *Moses* having given us an intimation of God, and the three Persons altogether in that *Bara Elohim*, before, gives us first notice of this Person, the Holy Ghost, in particular, because he applies to us the Mercies of the Father, and the Merits of the Son, and *moves upon the face of the waters*, and actuates, and fecundates our soules, and generates that knowledge, and that comfort, which we have in the knowledge of God. (PS, ix, 92-3)

[11] (5) The Old Testament revealed the Father openly, but the Son more obscurely; the New Testament plainly revealed the Son, but disclosed the divinity of the Spirit only somewhat obscurely. Now indeed the Spirit is present among us and manifests himself more openly. For, as long as the divinity of the Father was not yet confessed, it was not safe for the Son to be revealed nor, as long as the divinity of the Son was not yet admitted, for the Holy Spirit to be imposed on us like some heavy burden, if we may be allowed to speak thus. (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes*, 31.26 (PG 36:162C); my translation)

[12] (6) It was a hard work for the Apostles, and their successors, at first, to draw the Godhead, into one, into an unity: when the Gentiles had been long accustomed to make every power and attribute of God, and to make every remarkable creature of God a severall God, and so to worship God in a multiplicity of Gods, it was a great work to limit, and determine their superstitious, and superfluous devotion in one God. But when all these lines were brought into one center ... to draw lines out of that againe, and bring more persons into that one centrall God-head, this was hard for reason to digest. (PS, v, 47)

[13] [*T*he Trinity, is conveyed to our understanding ... as they have reference to one another by Relation, as we say in the Schools; for, God could not be a father without a Son, nor the Holy Ghost *Spiratus sine spirante*. (PS, i, 184)

[14] (7) Father and Sonne doe naturally imply, and induce one another; and therefore they fall oftner into our consideration. But for the holy Ghost, who feels him, when he feels him? Who takes knowledge of his working, when he works? ... [W]hich of us doth truly, and considerately ascribe the comforts, that he receives in dangers, or and in distresses, to that God of all comfort, the Comforter, the holy Ghost? (PS, ix, 53-4)

[15] And the benefits received this day, were such, as should never be forgotten: for, without this day, all the rest had been evacuated, and uneffectual.... [F]or this is *Festum Adoptionis*, as S. *Chrysostome* calls it; The cheerefull feast of our Adoption, in which, the Holy Ghost conveying the Son of God to us, enables us to be the Sons of God, and to cry Abba, Father. (PS, ix, 239-40)

[16] As the Trinity is the most mysterious piece of our Religion, and hardest to be comprehended, So in the Trinity, the Holy Ghost is the most mysterious person, and hardest to be expressed. (PS, v, 46)

[17] ... a more earnest communicating of himselfe, a throwing, a pouring out of himselfe, upon those, upon whom he falls: He falls as a fall of waters, that covers that it falls upon; as a Hawk upon a prey, it desires and it will possesse that it falls upon; as an Army into a Countrey, it Conquers, and it Governes where it fals. (PS, v, 49; cf. vi, 282)

[18] ... make your domestique peace there, a type of your union with God in heaven; and make your eating and drinking there, a type of the abundance, and fulnesse of heaven; and make every dayes rising to you there, a type of your joyfull Resurrection to heaven; and every nights rest, a type of your eternall Sabbath. (PS, v, pp. 56-7)

[19] [*T*he Holy Ghost, by his presence, and by inanimating the Ordinances of Christ, in the Ministry of the Gospell, applies this mercy, and this merit to me, to thee, to every soul that answers his motions. (PS, viii, 437)

[20] (8) The Holy Ghost is alwaies neare me, alwaies with me; with me now, if now I shed any drops of his dew, his Manna upon you; With me anon, if anon I turne any thing that I say to you now, to good nourishment in my self then, and doe then, as I say now; With me when I eate, or drink, to say Grace at my meale, and to blesse Gods Blessings to me; With me in my sleep, to keep out the Tempter from the fancy, and imagination, which is his proper Sceane, and Spheare. (PS, vii, 439-40)

[21] [*T*he holy Ghost is more ours, then either of the other Persons of the Trinity. (PS, vii, 441)

[22] The Trinity is not a mystery among others, but it constitutes the central mystery of Christian faith and should illumine the entirety of the Christian life. (*The Oxford Handbook to the Trinity* (ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1)

John Donne: Key Dates

- 1572 Between 24 January and 19 June: born in parents' house in Bread Street, London, the third of six children of John Donne, a prosperous ironmonger, and Elizabeth (*née* Heywood)
- 1582 December: uncle Jasper Heywood, head of Jesuit mission to England, imprisoned
- 1584 23 October: matriculates, with younger brother Henry, at Hart Hall, Oxford
- 1588 (Or 1589): possibly begins to study at Cambridge
- 1591 ?May: admitted to Thavies Inn as law student
- 1592 6 May: transfers from Thavies to Lincoln's Inn
- 1593 Early May: Henry imprisoned in Newgate for harbouring a Catholic priest and dies of the plague
- 1596 Volunteers for military service under Essex; June-August: serves with force that sacks Cadiz
- 1597 July-October: on ill-fated 'Islands Expedition'; November (or early 1598): appointed secretary to Lord Keeper Egerton and moves into York House in the Strand
- 1599 26 September: bears sword at funeral of Egerton's son Thomas
- 1601 February: Essex's rebellion and execution; October-December: sits in Parliament as MP for Brackley; December: secretly marries Ann, daughter of Sir George More and Egerton's niece
- 1602 Reveals marriage to Sir George; briefly imprisoned in the Fleet; dismissed from Egerton's service; legality of marriage upheld in Court of Audience
- 1607 June: applies unsuccessfully for post in Queen's household
- 1608 November: applies unsuccessfully for secretaryship in Ireland
- 1609 February: applies unsuccessfully for posting as secretary with Virginia Company
- 1610 Publication of *Pseudo-Martyr*, supporting government side in Oath of Allegiance controversy
- 1611 Publication of anti-Jesuit satire *Ignatius His Conclave*
- 1613 Seeks and obtains patronage of Earl of Somerset
- 1614 April-June: sits in 'Addled' Parliament as MP for Taunton; makes last attempt to gain state employment (as ambassador to Venice)
- 1615 23 January: ordained deacon and priest by John King (bishop of London and personal friend); shortly afterwards appointed royal chaplain and made DD at Cambridge by royal mandate
- 1616 16 January: appointed rector of Keyston, Hunts; 7 July: appointed rector of Sevenoaks, Kent; 24 October: appointed Divinity Reader at Lincoln's Inn
- 1617 24 March: preaches first of five sermons at Paul's Cross; 15 August: death of wife
- 1619 12 May: sets sail with Doncaster's expedition to Germany, to which he acts as chaplain (returning 1 January 1620); 16 June: preaches before Elector Palatine in Heidelberg
- 1621 September: told by James that he is to be dean of St Paul's; 22 November: installed as dean
- 1622 18 April: instituted as rector of Blunham, Beds; 15 September: preaches at Paul's Cross in defence of James's *Directions to Preachers*
- 1623 November: seriously ill with relapsing fever, which gives rise to *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (published 1624)
- 1624 18 March: appointed vicar of St Dunstan's-in-the-West
- 1625 27 March: death of James I; 3 April: preaches first sermon delivered before King Charles; meets George Herbert
- 1629 22 November: preaches final sermon at Paul's Cross
- 1630 Autumn: falls ill while visiting newly married daughter Constance; 13 December: makes will
- 1631 January: mother dies; 25 February: preaches last sermon (*Deaths Duell*); 31 March: dies

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