

## The Trinity and the Worshipping Community in Mission

By Mary Fisher

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Our Triune Creator always meets people where they are.

Our Creator constantly is inviting human persons into the fellowship of the divine community: Father, Son and Spirit. So mission is not about presenting abstracted theological information about who God is in ways that ignore the lives of the persons we are seeking to inform. Mission is invitation to the banquet of life knowing the Son extends the invitation of the Father to participate in the life of the Spirit in the beloved community for the sake of the world - human and non-human. Mission is the Creator sending us an invitation to life in a New Creation as friends; treasured children; the beloved bride; a new community. For this reason I am choosing to introduce this paper with how I came to consider what shapes all I now do.

For me the Trinity and Mission are not theological ideas.

The Trinity is the Community in whom I dwell as I seek to invite all around me - the petrol station owner; the checkout girl at Coles; the neighbour; Khadijah, the hijab-wearing Muslim woman from down the road - into my life that we together might encounter the one Creator, my Heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

### A Journey into Community

As a journalist on an assignment and one week shy of my 24th birthday, I was catapulted into believing Jesus cares. I didn't believe any "God" "existed", so how on earth could "he" have a "son"? But as a journalist for a newspaper - circulation 345,000 - I was covering a story. The story was about a community caring for Brisbane's marginalised teens and young adults - particularly drug adults. After spending a week among them I prayed these words: "I don't believe you exist, but if you do, please make yourself known".

A worshipping missional community had persuaded me that praying such a dumb prayer was something I should do. It was not their message that convinced me of the "truth" of the Gospel; rather their life of invitation to marginalised young people. It was a silent invitation to experience for myself the love of the Father, the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Six months later I was in Queensland Bible Institute. I studied because I wanted to make sure my faith was reasonable. I wanted to ensure my existential experience of "starting to believe" was not a journey into fantasy. The more I studied, the more I encountered through study the Creator's self-revelation. The more I participated in our Creator's missional celebration of daily life, the more convinced I became of the reasonableness of following a risen Christ, of being a member of a

Christian believing community. Within five years I ended up studying first in Hong Kong, then the People's Republic of China - courtesy of the Australian Government - for the sake of the Kingdom.

There the problem of what it meant to be a person daily confronted me. My fellow Chinese students were the most brilliant people I ever have known. They were the first students to enter University after the Great Cultural Revolution of 1966-76. Over the years we discussed everything: from betrayal to forgiveness - some had betrayed their own parents; from heterosexual relationships to homosexual relationships; from totalitarian societies to loving communities; from science - as the "four modernisations" of China had started - to the importance of the Arts. And constantly the issue of human nature and what it meant to be a person arose. And surprisingly in this very repressive communist society of the late 1970's I was catapulted into consideration of Trinitarian theology. It came through discussion of what it meant to be human.

Who was I? Who were my friends?

As my best Chinese friend said to me: "You define yourself in terms of what you do...you are a doctor, a teacher, a rubbish man, a housewife. You understand yourself in terms of function. We define ourselves in terms of who our parents are and what village we come from. We understand ourselves relationally."

I realised three things that evening as I journaled:

My Chinese friends would read the bible very differently to me.

The Creator's primary self-revealing identity was relational. Jesus defines Himself in terms of relatedness to the "persons" He calls Father and Spirit. He also defines Himself in terms of his relationship with his disciples, his followers. This is what we are foundationally saying about ourselves in saying we are in the image of a Triune Creator - one God, three persons Father, Son and Spirit. The Cappadocians, I later discovered, were the church fathers -and a sister also - who best articulated this for us. It was wonderfully described at the end of the last century by the title of a book called "Being As Communion".

Scripture defines our relatedness to the self-revealing Creator in metaphors of astounding relationship. We are "friends" of the Creator. Abraham is described this way in Isaiah, Chronicles and James. We are "children" adopted by the Creator - from Exodus onward throughout Scripture. We are the "covenanted bride" of the Creator Yahweh. Throughout the Old and New Testament texts this is a dominant metaphor.

The discussions on how we understood what it was to be human led to increasing awareness of Western Individualism. I became aware that valuing of individualism as opposed to valuing of human personhood mitigated against the forming of missional community.

Through working with the multi-cultural InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in the USA, and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students around the world, I grew in awareness that mission ultimately is a never ending journey, day in and day out, into the celebration of life in the Spirit as the Son makes known the holy life of the Father to me. A journey where grappling with human personhood in light of the Trinitarian unveiling is a daily adventure in mission.

Amid increasing urban diversity around the world economically, racially and religiously, we followers of Jesus need to ask ourselves on what basis we should be building community, and in what manner we should be doing this.

## 1. The Church as Worshipping Community - Imaging the Trinity

By and through the Spirit, we are a unity of “persons-in-relationship”, acknowledging the Creator unveiled in the Trinitarian first century Jesus of Nazareth event, from conception to Pentecost and onward in the life of the Church.

Ontologically, as the Creator is “one”, so is the Church. It is the Spirit Community, acknowledging Jesus, sent of the Father, as Lord who in the power of the Spirit inaugurated the new creation in the Kingdom of God.

Our unity is grounded in focus on Jesus, the Son of our Heavenly Father, manifesting always the unity of the indwelling Spirit, in a life of worship, mutual submission to each other in service, seeking always to live out the missional invitation of hospitality to the world around us.

## 2. The Church as Kingdom Disciples

The Church as Kingdom Disciples is marked by:

- the way of the Cross,
- an enlivening as a 'Resurrection Spirit' Indwelt Community,
- living out in the present the proleptic New Creation of the Kingdom which requires the Missional life of the Kingdom.

Likewise, we are disciples of our ascended King as we seek to serve others marked by the way of the cross, community and the new creation. We are disciples marked by resurrection life of the eschatological gift of the Spirit.

The canonical metanarrative of Old Testament and New Testament climaxes in the Trinitarian unveiling in the inauguration of the gospel Kingdom and the enlivening of the covenant people as church

## 3. Where are we to-day in the Western Church?

We have been shaped by several hundred years of Western Individualism. How?

### *i Augustine's metaphors on the Trinity*

The metaphors of Augustine which have contributed to our dilemma are that the Trinity is to be understood as reason, understanding and will in one human being. The problem of this in the opinion of leading scholars (Colin Gunton etcetera) is that this model of understanding the Trinity lead to a loss of understanding of the meaning of "personhood", and this helped prepare the soil of Western individualism.

There is a radical difference between understanding oneself as a person, and understanding oneself as an individual. Understanding human beings as persons will always emphasise the relational aspects of being a person. "Let's Start With Jesus" by Dennis Kinlaw in particular deals with central issues relating to understanding personhood.

Understanding ourselves primarily as individuals (rather than persons) leads to privatization, which isolates us from others.

When understanding ourselves as persons, we will always understand that relationship is foundational and essential to who we are. We learn language - a foundational reality of being human - through relationship. Who we become is shaped in a fluid matrix of relationships, moving, altering, creating new relationships, twisting, arising in new places. As Dennis Kinlaw expounds: To be person - whether human or divine person - is to be in relationship. The very essence of the Creator is that the Creator is Father, Son and Spirit. This distinctly Christian ontology is central to understanding personhood of humans and a life of mission. But the Enlightenment, technology and the myth of the lone hero/pioneer has created pit-falls in shaping missional life within faith community for the service of community.

### *ii Descartes Problem of Certainty*

Seeking certainty as foundational for his Christian faith, Descartes proceeded to doubt everything systematically. Ultimately he reached the conclusion the only thing he couldn't doubt was doubt itself. That is, he couldn't doubt the fact of his doubting process. That doubting process ultimately depended on his thinking process - so he came to the conclusion the one thing he knew for certain was that he was thinking: I think therefore I am.

This underpins a very individualistic way of understanding ourselves. It has long reaching consequences. It fails to recognize that to think we need language, a communal event. We also need and inhabit pre-existent world views. These world-views may be understood individually but cannot avoid communal cultural reception and/or shaping and the communal gift of language as prerequisite foundational tools.

### *iii Kant Created Further Problems*

Kant created further problems in that he divided the world into individual perception of the noumenal (world of the divine and morals), and the world of the phenomenal (perceiving reality through the five senses). He assumed all persons as neutral observers would reach the same conclusions in observation.

The problem with his thinking is no-one is a neutral observer.

Furthermore there is not a universal perception of the world of the divine nor the world of morality. Consequently his epistemic presuppositions created fertile ground for individualism in religious experience and moral perceptions because there is no universal agreement. This led to thinking that all religions are human search for meaning with all seeking "god" - whatever the word "god" means to different individuals. This concept is totally different from the Jewish, Christian and Islamic idea of a "god" who reveals "God's self" in unveiling or self revealing.

This is particularly important and central in the concept of the incarnation.

We do not believe individuals decide who "god" is, but that "God" has revealed who God is in acts/word. The Hebrew word "dabar" means both acts and events - in history.

### *iv The Industrial Revolution*

In the Industrial Revolution production moved from the communal guild with artisans teaching a craft, to the potentially and actual dehumanizing production line. This is illustrated in the Charlie Chaplin movie "Modern Times". In this context Marx's critique of religion needs to be understood. Marx perceived religion propping up an increasingly dehumanizing industrial revolution. Marx determined our humanity is defined by our being "forces of production". In other words, our work defines us.

While most of us would reject Marxism, most of Western society values persons in terms of our function in society. This starts with the simplistic of questions: "What do you do?" There is a foundational defining of persons in terms of function. Is this one of the reasons we do not know how to value the unborn and elderly in our society?

#### *v Emphasis on Individual Conscience and Conversion*

Emphasis on individual conscience and conversion as the gospel emphasis arose from Luther responding to the chaos of the Catholic Church, which in turn led to increasing individualism in how persons viewed themselves in rejecting Catholic authority. Luther's "priesthood of all believers" has devolved to this day to become a democracy of interpretation for many. Eschatology became focused on individuals going to heaven or hell. This was increasingly emphasized rather than how followers of the risen Christ are being called to fit into the kingdom agenda of the risen Christ as part of the Spirit-Indwelt eschatological community awaiting the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Good News that King Jesus is ruling now, centrally heralds a strong missional theology of the community called the church. The majority of New Testament teaching is about the life we are to engage in now as a servant community.

Fear of "works righteousness" led to a failure to understand we are to implement Kingdom presence into our communities as members of the Spirit community - the church. (This was heightened by the split between the liberal church and the evangelical church in 1912 world missions meeting where debate focused on the understanding of mission as being the social gospel over against calls for individual conversion). We must regain identity as persons who are the Spirit community. Persons whose identity is related to commitment not only to family relationships but also faith community.

#### *vi Loss of the Canonical Metanarrative*

Loss of the Canonical Metanarrative of the Creator-Covenant God of Israel acting in act/word. As a result we have moved from fitting into God's narrative action into history, to understanding our faith predominately in abstract categories. This abstraction leads to potential confusion such as the LAW comes before GRACE.

Trinitarian theologian Robert Jenson has written about what the loss of the Israel story leads to by the end of the first century within church history. Such loss also focuses us away from understanding how the biblical narrative is to shape us as a community. The first 70 pages of "A Community of Character" by Stanley Hauerwas deals with this issue. We need to regain the retelling of biblical narrative. Shaping as a community of persons by a particular narrative has been replaced by individual belief of autonomous individuals who do not have commitment to particular communities. To be in mission we must understand our placed nature within a matrix of relationships enabled by the Spirit in local communities called church.

#### *vii Limited Understanding of Pentecost*

There is limited understanding of the fact the Pentecost event inaugurated the Spirit indwelt community as community. Western Christians have little respect for the integrity of the local Body of Christ, moving from church to church for a multitude of different reasons. This is bad ecclesiology

and bad discipleship. It fails to understand personhood arising from Trinitarian definition of personhood. It fails to understand that the covenantal identity of being a person is focused through "love". This relational mystery, that the person cannot flourish without relationship, is a mystery that points us back to the relational essence of the Creator. There is no divine identity where the Father, Son and Spirit are divorced from each other. Each person of the Trinity has particular "function" arising from their ontological relatedness.

#### *viii Urbanization*

Urbanization has moved individuals to new locations breaking down communities.

#### *ix Architecture*

Architecture is not necessarily the friend of community in the church. We look at the back of each other's heads in many churches. Architecture has underlined individualism in persons' experience in everyday life in the city. From driving in our cars to the use of "smartphones" to the design of buildings, the communal is sacrificed too often.

#### *x Leadership Participation*

Some professional church leaders (clergy, academics) are not participating in communal life with believers. Persons with responsibility often seek to control rather than serve or be vulnerable. The way theological training occurs tends to place inordinate emphasis on transference of information rather than interaction and shaping through time spent in "apprenticeship".

#### *xi Perception of Self*

Perception of self in terms of

- a. "thinking" (the blessing/curse of good theological thinking);
- b. "experience" (the blessing/curse of private experience of God): there is an infinity of difference between private and personal - private experience is not open to challenge, personal experience can be measured against biblical worldview/theology;
- c. "function" (this defines us both in terms of work and within the church in terms of "giftedness"). In many cases "gifting" is very much related to self-fulfilment rather than service of others (1 Corinthians 12-14);
- d. "ownership"; has increasingly been democratized and consequently individualized. Economics increasingly emphasizes private ownership world-wide. Many cultures historically have been communally based in ownership.

All of this move from understanding the relational nature of personhood to individualism means we do not know how to be missional community. And the decline of hospitality as central to the Creator's presence in the world is a central challenge in the church. The unveiling of the Triune being

of God in the first-century Trinitarian Jesus of Nazareth event was and is the greatest act of hospitality ever in history (Luke 10 and Acts 10). If we continue to be dominated by growing individualism we will abort hospitality as the Creator's gift of His Spirit today to the world.

#### *xii Democracy*

Democracy amid people movements changing nations has led to increased individualism as different cultures change systems of governance.

#### *xiii Migration*

Migration can lead to loss of community.

#### *xiv Education*

Education can lead to increased individualism where sense of community is lost.

### **The Trinitarian Definition of Personhood**

Considering Jesus focuses us back to the relational identity of persons. This is heralded in the unveiling of the Trinity as central to the faith community being a missional community. In Jesus the word, the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us but as John reports he was not received. There was a rejecting of relationship.

This echoes Genesis 3 where the word of the creature is preferred over the WORD of the Creator. Other than murder there is no greater rejection of another than the rejection of another's word. And humanity in rejecting the WORD rejects the very ONE through whom life came into being. Genesis One - and Elohim SAID... And it was so.

Compare the Creation narrative of Genesis One with other creation narratives, and it unveils astounding hospitality. In the first century the WORD is incarnate as Jesus. An astounding event. It took centuries to articulate the Trinitarian action into the creeds, but the incarnation of the person of the Son as Jesus ultimately is key to our understanding the Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit.

The Christian worships a Creator of Holy Love: "three persons, one Creator". Each member of the Trinity is a unique person, and yet they cannot be understood apart from their co-inherence with the other two persons of the Trinity. This is known as Perichoresis in theology.

And this is manifest in astounding hospitality both in Creation - a profound event of hospitality - and in the Trinitarian New Creation where the Kingdom is inaugurated and the Creator is unveiled. What it means to be human is made manifest. We are persons.

As the Son of God Incarnate, Jesus cannot be described apart from his relationship to the Father and the Spirit. So too he defines Himself in relationship to the people around him. All of the "I Am" statements in John's Gospel are relational. As the person, the Son of God, in His incarnation, Jesus unveils the essence of being a person as the mystery co-inherence. Our relationships to the Creator and each other are the crucible of our functioning.

Until we consider serious reflection on personhood unveiled in the first century event, until we consider the astounding hospitality unveiled yet again in New Creation and until we move away from individualism to personhood - we will not understand mission is far more than a message.

Mission is a life wherein we live *into* a world surrounding us, in profound creativeness, building myriad relationships, so that the world may know the hospitality of the Creator who has liberated all creation from enslavement. Mission is living out the story which unveils what it means to be truly human. As the Father sent the Son in the power of the Spirit, we now too are sent by the Son in the same Spirit.

From June 18 for 30 days over a billion Muslims around the world will practice Ramadan fasting and prayers. They do not know of the hospitality of the Creator in that he came among them. May I suggest that an act of amazing hospitality might be to enter their world - as an hospitable Christian - as Jesus entered a world not at hospitable to him. Celebrate with them their desire to be received by the Creator and in so doing they might see the very hospitality of the Triune God they reject.

### Questions for consideration:

- What stood out the most for you in this paper? What kind of response does this evoke?
- “Shaping as a community of persons by a particular narrative has been replaced by individual belief of autonomous individuals who do not have commitment to particular communities.” Is this true of the Western church in your view? If so, how can we be realigned?
- How has individualism shaped Churches of Christ in particular? What might be done to help correct and manage this potential “shadow side” of our movement?
- Is the communion of Father, Son and Spirit the dominant image of God in our church communities? What other images shape us?
- What guides our choices of words, readings, music, sermons, etc. in gathered worship? What guides our communal life outside of “Sunday worship”? What practices might help deepen our communal life?
- What might hospitality look like in the missional church?
- What other questions does this paper provoke for you? Who might you explore these with?