

Margaret and the Holy Trinity

Let me tell you about Margaret. She works hard, and she finds the combination of work and family not always easy. She has three children, and one of them, Alison, has always had health problems. It started when she was a baby, and now that she is a teenager there are many nights of worry for Margaret. She is married to a decent man; and if the sparkle has gone out of their marriage, nevertheless Margaret is comfortable with the prospect of spending the rest of her life with Donald.

People who like Margaret, and that is most who know her, say that she is funny. Not that she tells many jokes, but somehow she just makes other people laugh. She's the one who breaks the tension with a story about what she overheard on the bus: she likes sending silly cards to people not because it is their birthday but just to make them smile. Maybe she needs to have a sense of humour, for Margaret is a police officer: so she sees plenty of the tears of life.

Indeed it was something someone said to her when she was on duty – oh, a few years ago this was – that made her think. There was some tension: you couldn't call it unrest, but there was definitely strain around her shift. Some of the team were clearly not getting on with others. Margaret was quite upset, partly because she wasn't sure if she were to blame or not. The Inspector had a word with her. She told him she was worried. Worried about young Alison, of course, and worried about the tension at work, and worried about her own part in it and how she should behave. "Let me give you a bit of advice", said the Inspector. "Do you know the Golden Rule?" Margaret thought this was a smart-aleck answer coming, but said nothing. So the inspector went on, "The Golden Rule is 'Do as you would be done by.'"

Simple enough, you may think. But Margaret has always called that brief conversation one of the turning points. One of the turning points of her life. Of course she had heard the words before: do as

you would be done by. Vaguely she had an idea that the words might be from the Bible, but so what? What mattered to her was that these were the right words at the right time. Suddenly she knew how she at least was to act, to behave, to deal with the tension at work. She could feel the confidence, the positive strength, coming right inside her as she said the words over to herself. Now at least she had some guidelines.

Years later she reminded the inspector of the moment. He had forgotten it completely. He couldn't understand why it had meant so much to Margaret: and privately he thought it wasn't the most helpful thing he could have said. But he was very touched to discover that he had managed to find the right word at the right moment for the right person in the right situation.

He had found more than he knew. Or rather Margaret had found more than she knew. For that was just the beginning. It was strange the way the words had affected her. They had helped her get it right at work; and because of that they helped her get it right in other ways and in other places and with other people. They became very important to her, these few words. She copied them out and put them on the fridge at home. "Do as you would be done by".

Which is where the nurse spotted them. It had been a hard time for Alison; and the nurse had been in pretty regularly. The police had been very understanding, and Margaret had been able to spend a few days looking after her daughter. The nurse had stayed for coffee and the two of them were in the kitchen. "Tell me about the Golden Rule", said the nurse. Margaret replied, "Oh, I heard about it ages ago, and somehow it has helped me to hold my life together. They're old words, but for me they are right up to date. They're from the Bible, actually." "Yes, I know," said the nurse. "Jesus said them. Just before the bit about worry and anxiety" "Worry and anxiety?" said Margaret "Tell me more". "If I remember right" the nurse went on, " it's all part of the Sermon on the Mount. I'm thinking of the bit where Jesus speaks about the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. They don't spend a lot on themselves, but they look terrific. If God gives such attention to the appearance of

wild-flowers, don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? " Suddenly the nurse was embarrassed "At least, that's what Jesus said". There was a long silence. Later, Margaret would describe that as another of the turning-points. Just then, she started to cry.

"I'm sorry", said the nurse. "No" said Margaret, "nothing to be sorry about. It just what I needed. It's just what I needed to hear". Again the right word to the right person at the right time. From that moment, Margaret began to deal with her anxieties. One of the ways she found to do that was to have a dip into the Bible. It was Alastair's Bible, actually. He had been given it at school for something or other, and it had lain around the house for quite a while . It was called "The Message" and it was a new translation: and Margaret found it was just right for her. What's more, she found that the things Jesus said – not just about do as you would be done by or about anxiety – she found that the things Jesus said were right. The words touched her and held her and helped her to see.

She asked the nurse if she could go to church with her. She could never have gone on her own, and even though she hardly knew the nurse at least it was someone to show her where she could sit and what to do about the offering. She was surprised to discover a couple of colleagues: two policemen she had known for years there in church. She began to go regularly: it wasn't easy with shifts and home – nothing would persuade Donald to go with her, so at least he would stay and look after the children. She hoped that they might start coming with her.

The years passed and the words of Jesus never lost their hold on Margaret. What he said was real, what he said was true. And not just his words. More and more she felt that in the things Jesus did, she was being shown a life, a power, even a love that was deep and full of meaning and beyond what she had ever understood before. In the early days she had been embarrassed by much of what she heard in prayers and sang in hymns, especially the bits about the cross and the death of Jesus. But as the years went by these parts of the story became more and more important to her. So much so that

she began to believe that somehow, in the death of Jesus and in the stories of his being dead no more, the most profound things that there were about human life and her own life were being made clear to her. She knew what they were talking about when they talked about God.

There is still so much Margaret doesn't understand. Where does all the suffering come from? Why is faith real for her and not for Donald and the children? How is it that she still worries, even though she trusts in God? Why are some of her fellow church members so difficult? How could she learn to pray properly? But she knows that she is loved and held by God and she believes that nothing will ever destroy that.

What you have just been listening to is a sermon for Trinity Sunday. For Margaret is an orthodox Trinitarian Christian. What happened to Margaret was that the words of Jesus came alive for her: in his words and in him she felt that she met God who had always known her and loved her. Not only that: over and over again she discovered that she was being shown, helped, led to discover the truth about God. She is led to the words of Jesus, and through them she is led, guided to the love of God. That is the classical Trinitarian expression of Christian theology. In God the Son she is shown God the Father by God the Spirit. In God the Son she is shown God the Father by God the Spirit.

Trinity is not a doctrine to describe hidden things in God: it is how people actually come to believe in God. Margaret's story is a very ordinary story. Trinity is not fancy stuff: it is simply the way things are.

Amen