

Tuesday Reflection 09 June 2020

## **The Rule of Three**

Perhaps prompted by the fact that we have just been celebrating the Feast of the Trinity, I have been reflecting on the number 3.

There is indeed something mysterious about the number 3; it is the minimum number of elements required to create a pattern, the minimum number of legs required for a stool, in design a space is conventionally divided into thirds; the rule of three suggests that things which come in threes are inherently more satisfying and effective than other number groupings. In philosophy the conflict between thesis and antithesis is resolved through the third element of synthesis as we move from two dimensions to three, adding the dimension of height.

When we come to look at ourselves, at human beings, we realise that we have been created in three parts - conventionally labelled 'body', 'heart' and 'soul', but here I would like to use the three elements of 'gut', 'head' and 'heart'. Our behaviour and action result from a complex interplay of these three elements, and if any of them are missing, then our actions and reactions will at best be ineffectual and at worst be disproportionate and even cruel.

Much of our activity starts in the reservoir of our physical being - we have a 'gut feeling', but just reacting to that solely at the level of instinct is sub-human, even bestial. We need to engage the mind, to analyse and understand where this 'gut feeling' is coming from and formulate a response. Just reacting at the intellectual level, however, runs the risk of the response being effective but inhuman - viz. Auschwitz. It is only when we then engage the heart - the source of emotion and the seat of love - that our response will be wholly human and thus a reflection of the divine within us. At the end of the process then comes action, mediated through the body. Just engaging the heart without the mind, however, can lead to sentimental and ineffectual responses to whatever the initial impulse was.

Which brings us on to sin and prayer. In the Greek Bible the word for sin is *amartia*, which means 'missing the target'. As Christians, the 'target' for which we aim is a Christ-like life, one lived to the best of our ability in line with the commandments, precepts and teaching of the Church; I suggest that we sin if we fail to maintain the harmony between the three aspects of our being. So where does prayer come in? There is clearly a strong physical aspect to prayer, expressed in many symbolic actions, but starting with the need to be physically present to the Lord. It is, however, the heart and mind which are principally involved. As John Main wrote: "The spiritual masters of the Orthodox Church ... see the fundamental consequence of the fall as the separation of mind and heart in the human person. ... The twentieth century word for sin is alienation. ... The mind is our organ for truth; the heart is our organ for love. But they cannot work independently of each other without filling us with a sense of failure, dishonesty, deep boredom or frenetic evasion of ourselves through busyness. ..."

The supreme religious insight in the East and West is that all our alienations are resolved, and all our thinking and feeling powers united, in the heart."

Thus the key words are resolution through integration.

Michael Townson