

The Sermon Delivered
during the Service Commemorating the
Birth Centenary of Rev. Dr. Lynn A de Silva
at the METHODIST CHURCH (Colombo 6),
on TRINITY SUNDAY (16 June 2019)
by
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N.B. *This is the written text that served as the basis
for the sermon which the preacher delivered.*

Dear Bishop Asiri Perera, dear brothers and sisters in the pastoral ministry, dear family members, relations and friends of Rev. Lynn de Silva, and all the faithful who constitute this worshipping community.

The video-clip screened before you a while ago is the homily I had preached on him and the tribute I had paid to him; it was my contribution to the international conference to be held in his memory and in his honour in Munich, Germany, on the 27th of this month. Since you have seen and heard me on the screen, I will not bore you by re-running that film from the pulpit now! For today, while we commemorate his birth centenary, here in this church, most other churches in this country and in the world are celebrating the mystery of the **Holy Trinity**. I shall, therefore dwell on today's liturgical feast and see Lynn's life within that Trinitarian perspective.

Holy Trinity unfortunately has been reduced by some into a mathematical equation: one is equal to three! Jesus and his immediate followers saw the Triune God as a *Community of Love*. Our God is not a loner. If God is Love, God has to be a community. The Holy Trinity, therefore, is not an invention of Christians. It is a reality insinuated already in the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 1:2 refers to God's Spirit (*ruah*) that hovered over chaos to bring about creation, while the book of Proverbs, 8:22ff (the first reading in today's lectionary) mentions another divine agent, an "architect" (*'amōn*) who assisted the Creator in the act of creation (v.30) and who had been *conceived and given birth* to by the Creator (vv. 22), i.e.. not created but *born* of the Creator (*qānānī, hōlālthī*) long before the Creation of the world (vv.25-27); it is this eternal and divine 'architect' that the Prologue of John's Gospel (1:1ff) refers to as the *Word which was in the beginning with God ('o theos) and was a divine person (theos) through whom everything was created, and which became flesh and pitched his tent among us*. In other words the Trinity was already foreshadowed in the Hebrew Bible in its reference to the Creator, the Creative Spirit and the Creative Agent.

Jesus confirmed the Trinitarian Nature of God when he gave us a glimpse into an *internal conversation within Godhead*. Yes, a conversation *within* God! For in referring to God, we hear Jesus employing the three "persons" that we meet in the grammar of any language:- I (first person), you (second person) and he (third person), or more precisely, **I, the Son; You my Father, and S/He, the Spirit!** Soon the Church recognized that *Personhood* is the result of intimate *Relationship*, a point that Dr Lynn de Silva brings out in his book which discusses the notions of Self and No-Self in Buddhism and Christianity. I shall come to that later.

Let me note in passing that, according to many historians, it was thanks to Trinitarian discussions of the Church that a very rich and positive concept of the Human Person began to anchor the Psychology that the West had developed in later centuries and also served as the foundation of today's human rights discourse. For in the cultural ethos in which Christianity spread in the early decades, the concept of 'person' was quite weak. The word *persona* in Latin and *prosōpon* in Greek referred to a "face", and even a *mask* which actors wore on their faces to represent the "characters" whom they *impersonated* on the stage during dramas. Trinitarian theology transformed this Greco-Latin concept into the very rich notion of **personality based on relationality**. For it is *relationality* that changes an **individual** into a **person**. Thus the doctrine of the Holy trinity had indirectly helped us to bring out the difference between "**unrelated**" *individuals in a CROWD* and "**inter-related**" *persons in a COMMUNITY*.

Let me illustrate this with an actual experience I had five decades ago when I was travelling by bus from Kandy to Colombo one late afternoon. I was in my clerical garb comfortably settled on the Clergy seat and doing a cryptic crossword puzzle (my one and only addiction) while the passenger who was seated next to me was dozing away (which was his addiction). Though seated adjacently we remained strangers. In fact all of us commuters in that bus were a mere *crowd of individuals* going in the same direction. There was no *communication* among us and therefore no *communion* either. But a little after sunset the unexpected happened. The bus driver, in a desperate bid to avoid hitting a drunkard crossing the road, lost control of the vehicle, which consequently swerved and zigzagged into a little mound on the side of the road. The man next to me was lying on the floorboard of the bus while I found my feet on his body and my torso on the next seat ... dislodging and hurting its occupier. It was chaos. I noticed many others fallen upon one another, with slight injuries that drew drops of blood in their faces and limbs. There was then a sudden eruption of mutual concern. We found ourselves comforting one another. The driver asked us to remain still until he checked whether the bus was perched steadily enough on the little elevation by the roadside; then he gently reversed the bus to the level ground and started attending to the injured. Now this driver who was a non-entity all this while assumed a role of leadership and we became so concerned for his safety that we advised him to go to the Police Station and report the matter lest any injury to the drunken man would be imputed to the driver's criminal negligence. We joined him in reporting the matter to the police, everyone vying with each other to give evidence in his defense. *Strangers we were no more!* Thus with the awareness of our *common* plight and our reciprocal *sharing* of our experience and with the *relief* we were trying to offer one another, we ceased being a **crowd of individuals** and became a **community of persons**.

Hence the Divine Trinity, which is the image to which we have been created, implies that we should live not like a crowd of individuals but as a community of persons. Our Church is a sacrament of that ideal, an ideal which we have to incarnate everywhere: namely, by not allowing families and nations as well as religious and ethnic groups to succumb to divisiveness, and also by building up a universe where humans live a community-life with Nature. Our immediate task, however is too clear to ignore: *transforming our nation into a Community of Persons, reflecting the image of our Creator*.

This is where Rev. Lynn de Silva steps into my homily! Lynn was inspired by the Jewish author Martin Buber's scripturally inspired thesis that **personhood** consists of I-Thou **relationship**; Lynn tried to understand and interpret the 'No-soul' (*anattā*) doctrine of Buddhists within that biblical perspective, bringing about both the difference and the connection between 'non-self' and 'personhood'. Lynn educated Christians to realize that the Bible too maintains a "no-soul" anthropology. The Hebrew word *nefeš* (breath, life) translated by St Paul as *psychē*, Greek for 'soul', had misled later Christians to assume that we have an *immortal* soul that survives the body ---something that Paul, the Jew, would have rejected outright. In fact Reformed Theologians Karl Barth and Paul Tillich severely criticized the Catholic Church for allowing Aristotle's idea of an immortal soul to infiltrate into Catholic theology! For it diminished the creatureliness of humans advocated in the Holy Writ.

In biblical anthropology, which Lynn upheld against popular beliefs, the body or flesh (*bāsār*) survives the mental/vital component (*nefeš*). At death the body lasts for a very long time as a decomposing corpse while the *nefeš* disappears instantly. We humans are not only *anattā* (no-soul) but also *anicca* (impermanent), being no more than “dust that returns to dust”, unless the Spirit keeps us alive here and now, and raises us up later when we die. In his classic, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*, Lynn maintained that **one has “no self” save in relationship**. In fact the exact words which he employed to express this view are quoted on the screen during the projection of the film.

Trinitarian theology educates us to realize that *personhood implies relationality*. This Sunday, being the Trinity Sunday, we must re-visit our mission as Christians ---the mission to re-connect individuals divided according to faiths, cultures, religions and races back into communities of persons reflecting the “community-image of the Tri-personal God” who created us. Recent events in our beloved land have further fragmented our nation. Today’s feast commands and demands that the task of the hour is to *restore relationships* that will turn our divided nation into a *community of persons*.

Lynn focused on restoring Buddhist-Christian relationship after centuries of estrangement; later, responding to the ‘signs of the times’, he found himself involved in the task of ethnic reconciliation between Sinhalese and Tamils, and recorded this experience in a special issue of the journal *Dialogue*. Today he would have thrown himself into the present chaos, repairing ruptures with the Muslim society. Dialogue sessions he conducted were aimed at building *relationality* among various ethnic and religious groups with a view to recreating inter-ethnic and inter-religious *communities*.

Let us follow his example, both in the field of scholarship and in the pastoral field, by being faithful to our mission of creating a *world that reflects the tri-personal unity of our Creator*; to achieve which, we Christians of all denomination must *first* bear witness to that very unity we wish to see among the rest of the people of our the country. How far are we Christians seen as a Community of Persons across denominational boundaries?

Please allow me now to be more personal. I witnessed an extraordinary *relationality* between Lynn and Lakshmi and I have already shared that experience with some of you. Shiromi, you told me that your Father could not drive the car alone, without your Mother showing the way at every turn. This was true of their marital life. He completely depended on her loving guidance, which he received abundantly. When Lakshmi died, Lynn was devastated. He visited me often and talked about her. His Sister-in-law, Mrs. Mendis once told me that now and then Lynn would say “I go to Tulana” (that is, to our Institute). Of course he would come by bus; for he could not drive the car. He would come and share with me his immense longing to be reunited with Lakshmi. Perhaps he felt he was no more a “person” without experiencing a palpable *relationality* with her. He shared with me his agony and I had no way of relieving him of his pain.

But I confess that I was so emotionally touched and so deeply edified by their life-long companionship that I dedicated an entire issue of *Dialogue* to “Lynn and Lakshmi”, including in it a neat summary of my twelve-hour long course on Asian Feminism given annually at the East Asian Pastoral Institute (Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines). It was my tribute to Lakshmi’s role in Lynn’s life and work. **For they were a living sacrament of the inseparable Community of Persons, whom we adore and love as our God.** Within a few years the Triune God re-united them, never to be separated.

Let me conclude my homily, dear sisters and brothers, with this prayerful aspiration (which was at the heart of Lynn's dialogical engagements):- may our Maternal **Father** who created us, and the crucified-risen **Son** who redeemed us, and the **Spirit** who is their Mutual Love sanctifying us, *transform us Christians into a sacrament of unity in our fragmented nation.* Amen [END]