

Trinity Sunday June 3, 2007

Welcome to Trinity Sunday. Last year on Trinity Sunday (which fell on June 11th), I preached at St. Mungo's, our sister parish in Alexandria, Scotland. And I am here to tell you.... they don't understand the concept of the Trinity any more than we do! As I read just a few days ago from the pen of an anonymous British writer: "The Trinity: the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the whole thing incomprehensible, designed by theologians to baffle us." Well.... maybe.

Trinity Sunday falls each year on the Sunday following Pentecost. We were awash in white for Easter, red for Pentecost, white for Trinity. Enjoy it. You will be looking at the color green for the next twenty-five Sundays! But our altar guild will get a much deserved rest. Last week, if you were not here, we were lost in red balloons, red hangings, red vestments and we heard the lesson from Acts of the coming of the Holy Spirit in seven languages.

Today we are given a doctrine to contemplate. And not just a doctrine, but a mystery. And not just a mystery.... this is the one day of the Church year we are asked to contemplate a teaching of the Church rather than a teaching of Jesus. If you go looking for the Holy Trinity in the Bible, you won't find it. So why bother if there is no scriptural basis for it, you might ask? Just how gullible are we supposed to be? Isn't belief in the Resurrection difficult enough.... even **with** scriptural authority in its corner?

You won't find any argument from me. If there was anything that nearly stopped me from becoming a Christian, it was the doctrine of the Trinity. In case you ever wanted to know, when you are raised Jewish from the time of birth, getting your mind wrapped around the Trinity is no easy feat. I may have already told you that in the beginning, Siamese triplets was about the best my mind could come up with, but even that never quite sat right. Once I just decided to accept the fact that the Trinity would never make any sense to me, and to just hope it did to God, I joined the Church. But there was no peace there, as my father, always ready to give me a hard time where my Christianity was concerned, took every opportunity to remind me that he believed in only **one** God.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just who **are** all of these folks? And, oh, the questions they elicit. If they are the same entity, how can one sit on the right hand of the other? Does the Spirit flow from one of them, two of them or all three of them and, if so, how can the Spirit flow from itself? (Eastern and Western Christianity still don't agree on that one.) How can you have a Son who is still you? And my favorite question: When Jesus talks to the Father, is he talking to himself? As one who lives alone, I would find a positive answer to that question quite comforting. Do you remember the country song, "I Am My Own Grandpa"? I have always had

a sneaking suspicion that this song might just be based on the Holy Trinity.

So maybe the first and most obvious thing that needs to be said about this God of the Christian community is that we do not and cannot completely understand Him.... or Her.... Whatever. I know some folks may think they do, but I, for one, do not. As this journey continues, I try to come to know Him a little better, but my limitations are legion. We continue to close in on the mysteries of our life and the universe, but God remains and will continue to remain beyond our realm and ability to understand absolutely.

Lord knows, there are people who spend their entire lives trying to discover and explain the inner working of the Almighty and I suppose will continue to do so long after we are standing before Him face to face. Some have better luck than others. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance.... And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.’”

In his revelation, John followed a voice speaking like a trumpet and “At once.... was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne.... the one seated there look(ed) like jasper and carnelian and around the throne (was) a rainbow that look(ed) like an emerald. (And) Around the throne (were) twenty-four thrones....”

What magnificent visions Isaiah and John had. What any of us wouldn't give to receive an insight with just half their power. I dare say, it would be enough for most of us to stand confidently with Isaiah and say, “Here am I, send me.” Actually, this passage is the appointed lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures for the ordination of priests in the Episcopal Church. But, while we stand to say, “Here am I, send me,” we do so without the certainty of Isaiah, without being able to say his words, “my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Do these face to face encounters mean, however, that Isaiah and John knew all there was to know about God? No. They would continue to plumb the depths of the Almighty for as long as they lived.

We do not and cannot know everything there is to know about God. If you can say you know all there is to know about God, I want more than your autograph; I want to come and sit at your feet. The Trinity is a doctrine of the Church, not a teaching of Jesus, and it is based upon all we **can** know about God from one place.... and that is our experience. The Trinity is not a scientific discovery. There are no facts or physics equations that can prove that one equals three, or three equals one, when it comes to God. There are no telescopes that can see Jesus sitting at God's right hand. The only proof we have is the experience of the Christian community.

It was the experience of the Christian community that created the doctrine of “God in three persons, Blessed Trinity.” It began with a community of people who followed the one God, the God who created all things, who called a community into being, who liberated it and made a Covenant with it, who remained faithful to it.

That same community then encountered the man, Jesus. Soon they began to wonder if he could be the promised Messiah, for he was a man who acted like God. He healed the sick, taught as one with authority, cast out demons, forgave sinners. He died an ignoble death which could easily have been avoided, only to be raised by his Abba God. He wasn't **like** God, the community now realized.... he **was** "God with us."

And then he was gone. Or was he? He was no longer there with the community but, somehow, he was there with the community. At least, once cowardly human beings spread the word of him without fear, even of death. And the community grew at an astounding pace and individual lives turned 180 degrees.... as if he had infused them and continued to infuse them with his own breath.

It would take some four hundred years for the Church to make sense of the details of its corporate experience and to codify it. I would have had us read today the Athanasian Creed in the back of our prayer books instead of the Nicene Creed, but I feared we might all go screaming out into the street, if we didn't fall asleep first. But do, please, read it on your own. Suffice it to say, the community came to realize that the word "God" was simply not adequate enough to describe their experience of the Holy. And when they looked for a language to express their experience, they came up with the Trinitarian formula. The Christian community believed that the God who had created heaven and earth, had become incarnate in a particular man, and that he still dwelt within the community and guided it. He was simply the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.... the Creator of the world, the Redeemer of humankind and the Sustainer of the community of faith. One God in three modes of being, living in perfect unity and relationship.

It is not possible for us to capture a complete picture of God, any more than it is possible for us to avoid traffic on the Capital Beltway. All we can do is, like Isaiah and John in this morning's lessons, describe what our experience of God is like.... what it is that happens when we are in the presence of God. At any given time, He may come as Judge to one of us and Comforter to another. He may come as Teacher or as the one who upsets our best laid plans. He may come in a whirlwind or a still small voice or a vision of heaven, itself. But be it known, there is one way He always comes. You can read all the books you want about the Trinity and you will, no doubt, learn something valuable. But in the final analysis, the experience of the Trinity is that of Love. To quote St. Augustine: "Lest you become discouraged, know that when you love, you know more about God than you could ever know with your intellect."

As much as we may hate to admit it, the only one who knows God completely is God Himself.... uh, Herself.... Whatever. And when it comes to the Trinity, we also have to live with the ambiguity and mystery of our own language and culture. But in spite of how difficult it may be to wrap our minds around the doctrine of the Trinity, the good news is that the Church does not require us to believe in a doctrine.... only in a God who is not to be found in books of ancient history, but is living and loving and moving in our lives right at this very moment, bringing us

into a future of His own making. And never forget that we are saved by grace, not by a system of intellectually or scientifically proven principles. And for that we say, “Thank God...Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Revelation 4:1-11
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