

Today is Trinity Sunday. Now I suspect that most of you did not wake up this morning and say wow, it's Trinity Sunday, I can hardly wait to get to church to celebrate this important doctrine of the Church. This is the Sunday most clergy like to have someone else preach so that they do not have to deal with the complexities and relative incomprehensibility of this doctrine. Three in one and one in three???

Trinity Sunday is the one Sunday of the church year when we celebrate a doctrine which, though implied in Scripture is not named there. The word Trinity never appears in the biblical text. It is a doctrine of the church and it took several centuries to be formulated and to become the official or orthodox teaching of the Church. That status was not achieved without lots of prayerful reflection, discourse, and heated debate and schism. By the fourth century, however, it emerged as the best and primary description of God which sought to capture not only the essence of God, but God's relationship to creation and its creatures.

The early Church leaders were not trying to create an arcane and abstruse doctrine, three in one and one in three, but were rather trying to describe the experience of generations of believers as they lived out their relationship to God. This doctrine has added to the divisions and conflicts between Christians and Jews and Christians and Muslims, both of whom suspect we Christians are really tri-theists.

'Great music' said the pianist Artur Schnabel 'is music that is better than it can ever be played'. That fits my faltering attempts to play Bach or Chopin at the keyboard. I know that I am touching a mystery here. It lies within the notes I stumble over, and in a sense, I am releasing that mystery as I play. Yet somehow it is always beyond the notes themselves, beyond even the most perfect performance of them imaginable. Worship, too, is something that is performed. The words we say and sing this morning – the creed, the readings, the intercessions, the Eucharistic prayer, the hymns, even this sermon – they are like a musical score: only in the performance, in the doing, do they come alive. And we realize that however good the words, however honest our intentions, our worship always falls short of what it proclaims, always points beyond itself.

An essential element of what we are doing in worship together is building community. A community created and called into being by God, not simply as a result of our own impulses or efforts. This community shapes our relationship to God and each other. It brings us together from our various backgrounds and histories, and enables us to transcend our fears and selfishness.

On Trinity Sunday, we realize the impossibility of ever doing God justice by talking about him. We ask too much of language when we expect it to carry this profoundest mystery of all:

"words strain, / Crack and sometimes break under the burden, Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place."

says T.S. Eliot. For how can we speak about the God who is both high and deep, beyond us yet within, encompassing all that has been, and is, and is yet to come? 'To whom then will you

compare God?' asks the prophet. I can barely comprehend the mystery of another human being, my own self even, let alone the mystery of God.

"For one like me / God will never be plain and out there, but dark rather and / inexplicable"

writes the Welsh priest-poet R.S. Thomas.

The early Church leaders knew they could not define God, but their efforts to describe the way God is experienced in people's lives and how people observed God's actions became the articulations that came to be the doctrines of the Church.

Now the doctrines themselves could not capture the totality of God or God's activities, but they could provide some description of what many throughout biblical history had experienced within the limited capacity of human words to treat with such profound realities.

We should not be surprised that when we talk about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit we find ourselves immediately resorting to metaphors and analogies. It is not because we know nothing about our subject, but we find the vast depth and breadth of our subject far too profound for even our most elevated vocabulary and most sophisticated philosophical concepts. In fact, when the doctrine of the Trinity is pushed too far, we will find ourselves in the midst of some kind of heresy or other.

I doubt that we spend much time thinking about the Trinity. We mostly focus on one or another of the Persons of the Godhead at any given time as we pray or think on God, and generally ignore this whole Trinitarian business.

What I believe the Church was trying to communicate and what we are still trying to say through the doctrine of the Trinity, and that is captured in the Scriptures for today, is that God is not some isolated reality of ultimate power that abides afar off and unrelated to creation, much as the deists of the 17th and 18th centuries held. God is love, and love has a focus outside itself, it is expressed in relationship to others. The people of the Bible experienced God as one who sought them out and called them into relationship with God and each other. In the reading from Proverbs we hear that wisdom or Sophia is a special creation of God; that was with God even prior to the creation of the universe, and wisdom is actively present in the world seeking to invite humanity into a relationship with God. It is wisdom that opens the door most fully to that relationship, and enables us to respond to and move into closer conformity to God's will.

The reading from the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is St. Augustine's and Martin Luther's favorite New Testament passage. In it Paul essentially says that the Father's love is poured into our hearts through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Spirit that we remain in relationship with God the Father and Jesus. The Father seeks to make his home in our hearts and lives. In the reading from the Gospel of John we hear Jesus preparing his disciples for his death and departure from them. He had much more to teach them, but they could not deal with it all at once, and his crucifixion was imminent. What Jesus promised was that he would remain accessible to his followers through the Holy Spirit whom he would send, and the Holy Spirit would continue to teach them what they would need to remain in relationship with Jesus

and the Father. Jesus' promise to those disciples in the upper room continues to be extended to us. Jesus invites us to be his disciples and to continue to learn from him. How do we do that when he is no longer walking the earth to teach us? It is through the Spirit whom Jesus sent to be with us after he ascended to the Father.

The people of the Hebrew Scriptures and the followers of Jesus have all been part of a community, and not just solitary believers. The nature of God, as experienced by God's people is one that continues to seek us out and longs for a deep and growing relationship. That relationship is grounded in love and mercy, as evidenced by the price God was willing to pay for our sakes, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We are all theologians in that we all seek to find meaning in life and in our experiences, and we have to come to some way of understanding of the meaning of our lives. I give thanks for the efforts of the brightest and best of us to describe the character and relationship of God which can be complex and confusing. I am grateful that there are those who through theological reflection have endeavored to articulate at least some of the reality we experience as a part of our journey in faith.

A senior professor who taught theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary shared something he had heard years before and which had always stayed with him. He told of attending a lecture series in Switzerland many years before at which a number of the most noted theologians of Europe were speaking. One of the premier theologians there was Dr. Karl Barth. At the end of the conference Dr. Barth was asked that out of all the profound theological concepts and truths he had studied and written about, what would he consider to be the most powerful and important. After some thought he responded that the most profound theological reality had been taught him when he was a child by his grandmother and mother, and it was: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

When all is said and done, the most erudite doctrines and theological teachings still leave us to answer the question: where is God for us and for this world in which we live? Is God for us, or not? The truth that all the theology and doctrines are trying to articulate is that God is indeed for us. That God seeks us out and initiates all relationships with us. He delights in us. Through Baptism, the Christian community brings others into a relationship of transformation and grace. Through Baptism persons are incorporated into this relationship with God and others through baptism into the community of God's very being: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God, who loves us and who seeks us out, and calls us into ever deeper and more profound relationships with God and each other. Amen.