

Sunday, May 27, 2018
Trinity Sunday (Year B)
Isaiah 6.1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8.12-17; John 3.1-17
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For a number of years now, in the week between Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, as I attempt to come up with a sermon on the Trinity, I watch a YouTube video that is part of the Lutheran Satire series. The video is called “St. Patrick’s Bad Analogies.” To see the whole thing, go to YouTube and search for “Patrick Trinity.” I also posted it on both my personal and the parish Facebook pages.

The concept behind the satirical cartoon is that St. Patrick supposedly used the clover – three-leafed variety – to explain the concept of the Trinity to the Irish. The video features Irish twins, Donall and Conall. The brothers confront St. Patrick, depicted by an icon. Donall says, “Okay, Patrick, tell us a bit more about this Trinity thing . . . But remember that we’re simple people without your fancy education and books and learning. And we’re hearing all of this for the first time. So try to keep it simple, okay Patrick?”

Patrick responds, “Sure. There are three Persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet there is only one God.”

Donall responds, “Don’t get what you’re saying here, Patrick,” to which Conall emphatically agrees. I’m sure most of us are right there with Donall and Conall. When we start talking about the intricacies and nuances of the Trinity, we get just as confused as they are.

The Trinity, that mysterious concept that boggles the minds of any who try to spend more than a few seconds thinking about it. The Trinity – the understanding that we worship one God, who is manifest in three “Persons” – an unfortunate term, yet the one theologians have chosen. We refer to these three Persons as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Now, we have no problem dealing with each Person of the Trinity individually. Where the difficulty comes in is that each of these Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is fully God, yet each represents a particular aspect of who and what God is, of different ways of viewing God. Three-in-one. One-in-three. How can three Persons be one God and not three gods? How can one God be three distinct Persons?

That’s where (the video) “St. Patrick’s Bad Analogies” comes in. Patrick starts trying to use analogies to explain the nature of the Trinity. Something theologians and preachers have been doing for nearly 2,000 years. With each analogy, the twins interrupt Patrick and pick it apart, citing ancient heresies about the nature of God that abounded in the first few centuries of the Church, such as Modalism and Arianism. The idea being that the problem with using analogies to explain the Trinity is that you always end up confessing some ancient heresy.

In exasperation, the icon of St. Patrick blurts out, “Fine. The Trinity is a mystery which cannot be comprehended by human reason but is only understood through faith and is best expressed in the Athanasian Creed, which states that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance. That we are compelled by the

Christian truth to confess that each distinct Person is God and Lord and that the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, equal in Glory, co-equal in Majesty.”

To which Donall responds, “Well, why didn’t you just say that, Patrick?” And Conall, “Yeah, quite beating around the bush, Patrick.”

The reason I watch the video is threefold. Kind of Trinitarian, huh? First, because it’s hilarious. And second, because even in its humor, it provides a good touchstone as to whether the illustrations I come up with actually help explain the Trinity or merely perpetuate some ancient heresy. And perhaps most important, the video reminds me that, as Patrick says, “The Trinity is a mystery which cannot be comprehended by human reason but is only understood through faith.” But that doesn’t stop me from trying to explain the Trinity anyway. It’s part of my job.

As I read through the lectionary readings for today, there were hints of aspects of the Trinity. The Old Testament reading from Isaiah talks about the majesty and supremacy of God. Our Epistle reading from Romans talks about us being “led by the Spirit of God,” thereby making us “children of God” because we “have received a spirit of adoption” which makes us “heirs of God [the Father] and joint heirs with Jesus Christ,” God the Son. And our Gospel reading from John talks about us being brought into the kingdom of God by being born of the Spirit, and the place of Jesus as Son of Man, Son of God, being the connection between heaven and earth through his descending – his incarnation – and his ascending – his crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. Jesus wraps up his discussion by saying “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3.17). And the unwritten part is that the world is saved through the Spirit who comes from God and Christ to live in us.

Despite these various references to God involving the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, there is no one statement in today’s readings, nor in all of Holy Scripture, that explains how the three Persons of the Trinity are three-in-one and at the same time one-in-three.

But what jumped out at me was our reading from the Psalms. Psalm 29 is traditionally categorized as an “enthronement Psalm,” celebrating God’s kingship. This is done through a call to worship addressed to divine beings; the imagery of thunder, lightning, and wind testifying to the Lord’s sovereignty; and concludes with an image of the Lord being enthroned. But what really spoke to me – no pun intended – was the repetition of the phrase “the voice of the Lord.” The voice of the Lord is upon the waters, is a powerful voice, is a voice of splendor. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees, splits the flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, and makes the oak trees writhe. The voice of the Lord. A voice carrying great power. A voice carrying the full power and authority of God.

At the risk of incurring the wrath of Donall and Conall, it seems that the image of the voice of the Lord might be a way of trying to explain the Trinity. Not so much an analogy, as maybe a different way to think of the Trinity, more in terms of specific functions of the one voice of God. The way the voice of the Lord is proclaimed. The voice of the Lord spoken by the Father, the voice of the Lord spoken by the Son, and the voice of the Lord spoken by the Holy Spirit.

We hear the voice of the Lord spoken through the Father at the creation of the universe, when all that existed was a formless void. When God spoke those first words, "Let there be light" (Gen 1.3). And throughout the creation process, the voice of the Lord successively spoke into being heaven and Earth, the lights in the dome of the sky, the waters, vegetation of every kind, the creatures of the sea, the beasts of the earth, and the birds of the air. And finally when the voice of the Lord proclaimed, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1.26).

Throughout the history of our people, the voice of the Lord spoke to his creation, seeking to reveal God to humanity. When the voice of the Lord spoke to Moses out of the burning bush revealing the name of God, saying "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3.14). When on Mount Sinai the voice of the Lord spoke to Moses, giving the Ten Commandments. When the voice of the Lord continually sought to guide the people by speaking through the prophets.

We hear the voice of the Lord spoken through the Son, the physical, human voice of God. The One whom John in his Gospel describes as the Word. The utterance from the voice of the Lord. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1.1). The voice of the Lord come in human form. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1.14). The Word, the voice of the Lord that taught about the kingdom of God through the Sermon on the Mount and in many parables. The voice of the Lord who spoke on behalf of God, who spoke out for God's people and against hypocrisy and corruption. The voice of the Lord who uttered the greatest of all commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22.37-40). The voice of the Lord who spoke of a new way of being servants of God: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn 13.34). The voice of the Lord who issued his final directions to his followers: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28.18-20).

We hear the voice of the Lord spoken through the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus as the one "whom the Father will send in my name, [who] will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14.26). The voice of the Lord that will "will guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16.13). The voice of the Lord which speaks to us personally and individually in the depths of our souls. The voice of the Lord that comes to each of us where we are in our own lives. Just as at the first Pentecost event when the voice of the Lord came to each person present in their own language. Allowing them, in turn, to serve as the voice of the Lord, exclaiming praise for the glory of God and proclaiming the Good News of the Resurrection. The voice of the Lord that continues to be uttered through each of us. And when we are weak and not always able to utter it on our own, that same voice of the Lord "helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8.26). The voice of the Lord guiding us, uplifting us, supporting us, in our own ministries to proclaim the voice of the Lord.

All of these the same voice, the voice of the Lord. Yet each spoken by a different Person, in different contexts, for different purposes, in different ways so we might be able to hear and understand. But to be sure, the cartoon icon of St. Patrick had it right all along. “The Trinity is a mystery which cannot be comprehended by human reason but is only understood through faith.” In our faith, we hear the voice of the Lord coming to us in many ways, yet always expressing the truth of God’s love in just the way that we need to hear or experience it. And when all is said and done, that is all we really need to understand about the great mystery that is the Trinity.

In the name of the Holy and undivided Trinity, One God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.