

Sunday, May 30, 2021

Trinity Sunday (Year B)

Isaiah 6.1-8; Romans 8.12-17; John 3.1-17

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/273744054490076>

(Sermon begins at about 22:25)

“Living into the Mystery of the Trinity”

Prepare to be baffled! Because, yes, it is Trinity Sunday. That one day a year when we have the opportunity to take a deep dive—or at least attempt to—into one of Christianity’s most important, yet most baffling, doctrines: the Trinity. So, what is the Trinity? First, I will give the obligatory overview, and then attempt to find some way to explore it in hopefully a more understandable way.

According to the doctrine of the Trinity, we believe in one God who is comprised of what theologians rather unfortunately refer to as three “persons.” “Persons” is really a misleading label, as we are not dealing with corporeal humans, Jesus notwithstanding. In actuality, the Greek term that we have translated as “person” is more aptly translated as “being” or “substantive reality.” Or, as applied to the Trinity, “individual reality.” Of course, we know that these three “persons” are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These three “persons” are distinct, but at the same time are of one substance or essence or nature. Despite being distinct, each “person” is wholly God. One God in three distinct “persons.” Three “persons,” all the same essence and nature, all the same God.

The difficulty we run up against in trying to explain the Trinity is that there is no explicit description of the Trinity in the Bible. The term is never used in the Bible. Now there are numerous texts dealing with each of the “persons” individually. And there are even some passages that reference or allude to all three “persons” in the same passage. Take our readings for today. All three, either directly or indirectly, incorporate all three persons of the Trinity. Our reading from the Prophet Isaiah, while only directly referencing “the King, the Lord of hosts,” strongly implies the presence of other “persons.” Isaiah is having a vision of appearing in the heavenly court. The only words spoken by God in this vision are “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” (Is 6.8). “Who will go for us?” Not likely use of the “royal we” but more likely “us” referring to the other persons of the Trinity. At least, that’s how I see it. Then in our Epistle reading Paul refers to all three “persons” of the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. And in our Gospel reading, Jesus—already part of the Trinity—refers to the other two “persons” of the Trinity: God, referring to the Father, and the Spirit.

So, we have three readings from a variety of perspectives that incorporate the “persons” comprising the Trinity. And yet, no clear indication of exactly what the Trinity is or how “it” operates. The closest we come to it all being brought together is in the Gospel reading for Trinity Sunday for Year A (which was last year), where Jesus directs the disciples to “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” (Mt 28.19). Here, Jesus alludes to three “persons” as coming together under a single name: that of the Triune God.

Based on the disparate information in the Bible about these three “persons,” the early Christians struggled with making sense of what all this meant as they reflected on scripture and their lived experience of God, particularly as manifest in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And humans being who we are, naturally wanted to figure out how all this works, to be able to explain what they read in scripture and what they experienced in their own lives. As a result, competing and contradictory explanation arose, resulting in confusion and some pretty nasty theological debates. To solve the problem, theologians developed the doctrine of the Trinity to try to explain how the “persons” relate and interact, to describe what is probably the greatest mystery of our faith: that we believe in one God comprised of three “persons;” three “persons” that are each totally and completely God.

But where does that get us? The whole concept remains incomprehensible to our human understanding. We continue to be baffled. So, rather than try to come up with some explanation that, ultimately, will not do justice to the issue, that will not really explain or clarify anything, and that will quickly devolve into one of the great heresies of antiquity, perhaps it’s better to come up with an approach that gives us a practical idea that we can relate to our own lives. After all, isn’t that why we’re here? Not so much to try to explain the unexplainable, the great mystery that is God, but rather to seek ways to live more fully into who God created and calls us to be. Or another way to look at, we are here to seek ways to live more fully into the Divine Mystery.

Awhile back I was reading a book entitled *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*. One chapter contained a discussion of a model for understanding religious development that was part of Friedrich von Hügel’s *The Mystical Element of Religion*. This model spoke to me as being a good image, not for explaining the Trinity, but for giving us a model of the development of our lives of faith that somewhat mirrors the complexity and interrelatedness of the mystery that is the Trinity. According to von Hügel, healthy spiritual growth includes three aspects of religion; what he refers to as the institutional, the critical, and the mystical.¹ This is a model for how we live into the Divine Mystery that is the Trinity. And while not intended to provide an explanation of the Trinity per se, I see in each of these aspects parallels to each of the “persons” of the Trinity. Making this all the better.

First is the “institutional aspect” of our religious development. This aspect or dimension is “of central importance in the early stages of personal development when [one depends] on sense impressions, memory, and instruction from others” as one develops their religious beliefs.² In short, people’s religious beliefs are shaped or at least influenced by those whom they trust. For many, their religious development comes when they are young, with their beliefs being shaped by their family. For some, this may come later, but still often occurring through the example and influence of trusted individuals. At this stage of religious development, the driving force is typically the institutional church—what happens at one’s place of worship—which serves as the authority for religious matters, being the holder of history and tradition.

With respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, I see in this “institutional aspect” the image of God the Father. What we Christians might view as the primary image of God before the Incarnation of Jesus’ birth or the coming of the Holy Spirit. God the Father as Creator. God the Father as the giver of the Law. God the Father as the One who established the Covenant with his people, seeking to build relationship.

Second is the “critical aspect” of our religious development. Von Hügel describes this stage as a period of “trustful questioning, but still of questioning, first others, then oneself.”³ It is at this stage that the individual is able to look at the principles of the faith as they have been conveyed through the institutional church and trusted others, and begin to apply those principles to their own life. This is a stage of questioning and making connections as a means of refining and integrating religious beliefs. This is moving beyond what is merely handed to the individual and about coming to a place of more fully understanding the teachings of the faith and being able to apply them to their own life. Of making their faith their own.

With respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, I see in this “critical aspect” the image of God the Son—of Jesus Christ. Jesus being God Incarnate, who came to provide a more direct and personal connection between God and humanity. And the way Jesus accomplished this was by engaging each person individually, meeting them where they were in their own life, and helping them to see how God loves them where they are. To help them see how they can best live into God’s laws and commandments in their own lives. To develop a more personal and unique relationship with God through Christ.

And third is the “mystical aspect” of our religious development. This is “the cultivation of an inner life and sensitivity to the world of interior experiences.” Von Hügel notes that “here religion is rather felt than seen or reasoned about, is loved and lived rather than analyzed.”⁴ This is when our religious life becomes an integral part of who we are. This is the place where we truly begin to live into our faith in all areas of our life.

With respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, I see in this “mystical aspect” the image of the Holy Spirit. Just as at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to be God’s ongoing presence with us, dwelling within us, to provide strength, guidance, nurture, and inspiration in our lives. To be our constant and ongoing companion as we move through our lives. As we live into the fullness of who God is creating us to be. Becoming an integral part of who we are as beloved of God. And thereby providing what we need to fully live the Gospel.

Von Hügel then talks about bringing all three of these aspects together. He writes: “everything else being equal, my faith will be at its richest and deepest and strongest, in so far as all three motives are most fully and characteristically operative within me, at one and the same time, and towards one and the same ultimate result and end.”⁵ In other words, all three aspects are important in one’s religious development, with all three aspects being interrelated, manifesting themselves in their own unique ways, yet contributing to the one goal of strengthening one’s religious life. Not unlike how the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each manifested in their own unique ways, while being of one substance—namely, the One God.

Trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity is impossible. At least for us humans. We can try to find ways to approximate an explanation, but to do so will always fall short. Rather than drive ourselves crazy with such exercises, maybe the real point is to recognize that it is a mystery and then to do what we can to live into the Mystery. To find those ways in our own religious development and through our own lives of faith in which we can experience the Mystery. To be open to discerning those ways in which we can experience the “persons” of the Trinity in our own lives. Because not only is it impossible to accurately define the Trinity, but we also know that how we experience our faith is as individual and unique as we are. No explanation or model will ever be able to account for every possible experience of the Divine Mystery. So, instead, let’s just do our best to live into the Mystery, to embrace it, and allow God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to love us and be with us, as we are, as we need them to be, and as they choose to manifest themselves in our daily lives.

¹ Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 64.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 64-65.

⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵ Ibid.