

Sunday, June 4, 2023

Trinity Sunday (Year A)

Genesis 1.1—2.4; Matthew 28.16-20

St. Gregory's, Long Beach and St. Thomas of Canterbury, Long Beach

Annual "Mass in the Grass"

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

"Co-Creators with the Trinity"

There is a story—perhaps apocryphal—about Augustine of Hippo, one of the great theologians of the early Church. A story that illustrates his unending thirst to know God: "St. Augustine occupied himself with several religious works, and among others, a Treatise on the Trinity. One day, as he was walking up and down the shore, meditating on this mystery with his mother, they saw a little child, who, having dug a tiny hole in the sand, was filling it with sea-water out of a cockle-shell. Augustine, smiling, asked him whether he thought to empty the whole ocean into it? The child replied, 'Why not? It would be easier than to get into your head the incomprehensible ocean of the Holy Trinity!'"¹

Whether true or apocryphal, one thing is certain: attempting to understand the Holy Trinity is about as easy as emptying the ocean one shell-full at a time. Which does not stop us clergy from trying to do so every year when Trinity Sunday rolls around. According to the doctrine of the Trinity, we worship one God who is manifest in what theologians confusingly refer to as three "persons": the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The difficulty is that there is little explanation of the Trinity in the Bible. There are texts about each of the "persons" individually. And there are also references to the interrelationship between the various "persons" of the Trinity. Together providing indications of a certain distinctness of the "persons" while at the same time, implying a oneness. But otherwise, there is little in the Bible to really bring it all together. The only text that really does this is in our Gospel reading for today, in which the Risen Lord 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."

Of course, humans feel a need to understand and explain everything. Even God. So, based on what the Bible tells us about these three "persons" and how they relate and interact, theologians have developed the doctrine of the Trinity to describe the indescribable. Of course, God is ultimately beyond our full comprehension and any explanation is bound to be incomplete and simplistic. But at its essence, the doctrine of the Trinity states that there is one God in three "persons." The three "persons" are distinct, but are of one substance or essence. Despite being distinct, each "person" is wholly God. What we sometimes refer to as "three in one and one in three."

Don't think on it too hard. It will just make your head bone ache. It is, admittedly, very confusing. And how it all works—three in one and one in three—is certainly beyond our comprehension. It is a mystery. Of course, that does not stop us from trying to explain it anyway. While trying to come up with analogies and models to describe the Trinity can be an

interesting thought experiment, such exercises, in actuality, yield little additional insight. If anything, there is always the danger of descending into heresy, because of the sheer impossibility of the task. Perhaps what is more valuable is to look at Scripture and see what we can glean about the Trinity. And more importantly, how the Trinity operates in our lives. As individuals and as communities of faith.

What is truly important is how we experience God in our lives. What is fairly well encapsulated in three common functional terms used to describe the “persons” of the Trinity: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

The Creator being God the Father, who created all that is, holds all creation in his hands, and watches over us.

The Redeemer being God the Son, Jesus Christ, who became flesh to demonstrate God’s love for us face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh. Through his humanity, we can more readily relate to God. And to provide the ultimate demonstration of love: providing for the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life.

The Sustainer being God the Holy Spirit, who is always with us, surrounding us with God’s love, guiding and inspiring us. God’s ongoing presence, abiding in us, as we go about our day-to-day lives.

Each of these “persons” is fully God, but represents to us a particular aspect of who God is; of how we experience God at varying times in our lives. We need all three to be able to relate to and experience the fullness of who God truly is.

That is a quick overview of what the “persons” of the Trinity mean for us in our lives of faith. As the Bible demonstrates, there are a variety of ways that plays out in our own lives, individually and collectively. One of the key indicators of how the Trinity operates in our lives is found in our first reading from Genesis: the story of creation. From the outset, this story demonstrates a critical aspect of the Trinitarian God: the creative energy of God. And as the rest of the Bible unfolds, we see how that creative energy is manifest in each of the “persons” of the Trinity.

There is a critical moment in the creation story that directly connects us to the Trinity’s creative energy. A moment in which that creative energy is gifted to us. On the sixth day God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” This statement is huge! First off, the part about making humankind in “our image.” Giving a very early indication of the multi-faceted nature of God that we now recognize as the Trinity. Giving an indication to the relational nature of our God, from the very beginning. That relational quality being extended to humankind; to those made in the image and likeness of God.

There are certainly many ways that being made in the image and likeness of God could be understood. One of the most significant being that we are not merely creatures of God. The first humans were given the directive: “Be fruitful and multiply the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves upon the earth.” More recent Biblical scholarship has taken being made in the image and likeness of God to mean that we share in

God's creative energy and abilities. And from the beginning, humanity is expressly commissioned as partners with God in creation, being co-creators with God.

While this co-creative aspect of our relationship with God is evident in so many ways throughout our history, one of the most far-reaching, one of the most enduring, is found in the work the Church is called to do. We are called to help bring about the Kingdom of God through the work we do in God's name. Creating communities of faith that serve as the Body of Christ active in the world. We are called to share the love of God that was demonstrated through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Sharing that love in word and action through our various ministries. All of which we do in response to the promptings, through the guidance and inspiration, of the Holy Spirit. In this, we are indeed living into what it means to be made in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God. Reflecting the relationship we have with the Trinitarian God. Which, in and of itself, reflects the relationship between the "persons" of the Trinity.

If this co-creative nature of the Trinity is inherent within the purpose and function of the Church, it is doubly so—or maybe triply so—in what is happening here and now. Not just what is happening in our coming together to celebrate Trinity Sunday. Even more so, what is happening in the lives of our two parishes, coming together in shared ministry. Just as with the "persons" of the Trinity, St. Gregory's and St. Thomas of Canterbury each have their own unique identity, our own unique nature. We each have our own style of worship, our own outreach programs, our own parish activities and ministries. Each meeting the needs of our respective members and of our broader community. Even so, we have chosen—by the promptings of the Holy Spirit—to come together in shared ministry, seeking to find ways that we can enrich, deepen, strengthen, what we are called to do as co-creators with God, as the Body of Christ. Honoring and cherishing our unique identities and ministries, but coming together, where appropriate, to create new opportunities for worship and ministry that neither could adequately achieve on our own. Not seeking to diminish what either parish is or does, but seeking to create something new with its own identity and purpose. Something new that will strengthen not only St. Thomas and St. Gregory's, but also the broader church and our work in the world.

While there are no perfect models or images for the Holy Trinity, we can find reasonable approximations if we look. And we have only to look around us at those gathered here today. To see that we are co-creating with God, seeking to create a new way of being Church. A new way of being the Body of Christ. St. Gregory's, St. Thomas of Canterbury, and our emerging and growing shared ministry—three entities united in our dedication to support one another, create new and exciting ministry opportunities, all as a way of further sharing God's love in the world.

¹ <https://www.lentmadness.org/2023/03/augustine-v-joanna/>