

Sunday, May 26, 2024

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/1156786422187966>

(Sermon begins at about 22:35)

“Our Trinitarian God”

Today we ponder, we commemorate, we celebrate, that most sacred, yet most bemusing, of mysteries: the Trinity. The day on which many clergy struggle to find ways to explain the unexplainable, and parishioners walk away with a headache from trying to do the mental gymnastics of comprehending the Trinity as what we often hear referred to as Three in One and One in Three. So, we might as well bite the bullet and dive in. According to the doctrine of the Trinity, we believe in one God who is comprised of what theologians oh so confusingly refer to as three “persons”—albeit a misleading label. These “persons” are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And yet, despite being three distinct “persons,” the three are of one substance or essence. Despite being distinct, each “person” is wholly God. So we’re good with the idea of worshiping one God. And we’re good with the idea of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But it is in the reconciling of these two seemingly disparate concepts, these two conflicting and yet integral parts, where we run into trouble. More often than not, devolving into a variety of ancient heresies. With the legalese out of the way, I will attempt to explain at least something of the Trinity without the use of lame and heretical analogies, and hopefully without giving you a headache in the process.

The real crux of the matter is that the doctrine of the Trinity is, as I said, an attempt to explain the unexplainable. Because that’s what we humans do—seek to make sense out of what we do not understand. The problem lies in the fact that the Bible really does not say anything about the Trinity as a unified concept. There are texts about each of the “persons” individually. And there are also references to the interrelationship between various “persons” of the Trinity. But there is little in the Bible to really bring it all together. The only text that really does this is at the end of Matthew, where Jesus directs the disciples to go into the world and baptize new disciples “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28.19). So why the mental gymnastics in taking these various pieces and trying to put them all together? Why not just accept what the Bible says and move on?

Allow me to share a piece of commentary I recently ran across—one that provides some insight into just why trying to explain the Trinity was so important to our forebears in the faith. And to us.

The ancient doctrine of the Trinity arose out of early Christian reflection on scripture and their experience with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For them, encountering Jesus was somehow encountering God directly — and at the same time, Jesus spoke of God as both distinct from him (as when he prayed to God, or spoke of God as the One who sent him) and yet nevertheless “one” with him. There was in some way both a “two-ness” and a “oneness” in

play, and so Christians sought out ways to express this mystery with poetry and precision. Likewise, the earliest disciples experienced encounters with the Spirit as encounters with God directly — and at the same time, Jesus spoke of the Spirit as a guiding, challenging presence distinct both from him and from the One to whom he prayed. And so arose, over time, the church’s doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God is properly conceived as both Three and One. Not three Gods — for that would miss God’s oneness. And not merely One — for that would miss God’s threeness, and wouldn’t do justice to the sense of encountering God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit . . . In short, the doctrine is ultimately about a world saturated with divine presence, and a God “in whom we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).¹

Through Jesus and his teachings, the disciples came to understand God operating in the world and in their lives in multiple ways. That there were multiple ways of relating to and with God. The result was a desire to try to explain these multiple, interconnected ways of viewing and relating to God in a unified way. As the doctrine of the Trinity developed more fully, and as the concept became an integral part of the Christian tradition, we have been able to look back at Scripture—which was written prior to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, or in the case of the New Testament with the doctrine being in its infancy—and see how the various “persons” of the Trinity were operative throughout salvation history. That the three “persons” of the Trinity were there all along; it’s just that we now had a new lens through which to view Scripture, by which people of faith could see more fully the nature of God and how God operates in the world and in their lives.

All three of our readings for today provide glimpses of multiple “persons” of the Trinity being present and at work. In the reading from the Prophet Isaiah, from a time when the concept of the Trinity had not even been conceived, we hear a passing reference so cryptic we might just miss it. In Isaiah’s vision, God asks the question, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” “Whom will **I** send, and who will go for **us**?” The use of “us” isn’t the “royal we.” It is a peak into the fact that the Lord God is apparently manifest as more than a single entity.

Our second reading from the Letter to the Romans gives a more explicit picture of the multiple “persons” of the Godhead—of who they are and how they relate. Specifically, how they relate in our lives of faith. Paul states, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” Making a clear distinction between God—commonly referred to and understood as “Father”—and the Spirit. The Spirit of God being a separate “person” and yet at the same time one with God. The Spirit being a manifestation of God, coming from God, and yet having a unique role to play in relationship with humanity. The Spirit connecting with us in an intimate way: “that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” The Spirit also being distinct from Christ, and yet being the one that serves to connect us with God and Christ as heirs of God’s kingdom. Pointing more to the interrelationship between the “persons” of the Trinity and implying the unique ways each of these “persons” relate to us.

The encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus in our Gospel reading similarly provides an indication of the “persons” of the Trinity and how they relate to one another and to us. Nicodemus says to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for

no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” A radical statement from a Jewish leader, essentially equating Jesus with God, or at the very least recognizing that Jesus has divine qualities. Jesus then brings the Holy Spirit into the conversation when he notes that “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Recognizing that the Spirit, while of God, is distinct. That God sends his Spirit to provide a means of connection between God and humanity. Jesus then closes the loop when he states that famous line: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” He had already discussed with Nicodemus the role of the Spirit in providing entry into the kingdom of God, into eternal life. He has now placed himself solidly in that three-part relationship as the Son who is of God and is sent by God, as yet another means of connection with and relationship between humanity and the Triune God.

The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus lays out all the “persons” of the Trinity and begins to provide the connections that would, in the fullness of time and in the hands of theologians, become the doctrine of the Trinity. In this passage, we begin to see how our understanding of the Trinity took shape, and to discern the role of the Trinity in the story of salvation history: God as the One who sends, Jesus the Son as the One who is sent, and the Holy Spirit as the One who comes as an advocate and ongoing presence following Jesus’ departure. The one, Triune God who, while three separate “persons” is at the same time of one substance, in mutual relationship with one another. These same relationships being manifest in their relationship with humanity. This ongoing relationship, or relationships, forming the doctrine of the Trinity, in which God is active in our lives. As the Father who created and continually recreates us. As the Son who redeems us and sends us out into the world in his service. As the Holy Spirit who guides and empowers us for the ongoing work of proclaiming the Gospel and building the kingdom of God.

Our forebears in the faith struggled with trying to make sense out of the varied ways in which God revealed himself and related to them. Given what they had to work with, the doctrine of the Trinity that emerged is pretty ingenious. Even so, the Trinity is a sacred mystery that we just cannot fully comprehend. While we cannot fully comprehend the Trinity, we can fully experience the Trinity in our own lives. The doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, provide us with a framework for how we relate to the Divine and for how the Divine chooses to be made known to us. At its essence, the Trinity is about God seeking to be in relationship with us. As the Father who created all that is for our use, care, and enjoyment. As the Son who redeems us and provides us with the means for eternal life. And the Holy Spirit providing ongoing guidance and inspiration as we seek to faithfully live into what it means to be children of God. Rather than drive ourselves crazy trying to explain it—unless you enjoy that type of thing—we can take this opportunity to recognize that the Trinity is the full expression of God’s love for us and is our invitation to experience and live into the fullness of relationship with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

¹ “Three and One: SALT’s Commentary for Trinity Sunday,” SALT, May 20, 2024.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-trinity-sunday>.