

Sermon for Trinity Sunday,  
May 11, 2008

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The Gospel lesson for today concludes:

Jesus came and said to them, “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.

This is theologically known as the Great Commission, described in Hymn 528, which we just sang, and re-enacted in the Covenant of Baptism we are so familiar with. This is the directive Christ gave to all of his disciples and, by extension, to all of us.

Jesus didn't send them forth in his name nor in the name of his Father. He sent them forth in the name of what Christians have come to call the Trinity, tho' he left it to the church fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century to call it that.

This is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday in the liturgical year—w/ the poss. exception of Christ the King Sunday, which falls just before Advent—that is designated to celebrate a theological doctrine. And what a problematic doctrine it is! To generations of committed & faithful Christians it has seemed an unnecessary puzzle, not essential to believe for salvation. And it really isn't.

What is the doctrine of the Trinity, and why do we have it?

I should've thought you all would know the answer by now, because if you have been a parishioner in any Episcopal or Anglican church for the past twenty years—or of a

Roman Catholic or Evangelical Lutheran Church—you have sat through twenty Trinity Sundays and should know all about this. But alas, sermons on Trinity Sunday seem usually beside the point because priests don't like to preach on Trinity Sunday. If they are lucky to have a compliant deacon, they foist that day on them. (My wife tells me that she believes she has preached five times on Trinity Sunday.) This remission of responsibility is scandalous. But as a reader of the General Ordination Examinations of Episcopal seminarians, I regret to tell you that our graduates from these hallowed halls of divinity know less about theology than you think, and so it is more fitting that the sermon on Trinity Sunday be delivered by the professoriate.

What is the doctrine of the Trinity, and why do we need it?

We should expect some clarity from the Catechism, beginning on p. 845 of the Prayer Book. Let us turn there.. 851-52 have questions about the creeds, but there is little help on the Trinity there. However, there is question on the Athanasian Creed and its relevance to the Trinity. So perhaps we should look there.

This creed has been attributed to Athanasius, a deacon in the Church in Alexandria. It was composed in response to a position advanced by a priest in that city named Arius, who expressed the reasonable notion that the Son of God was not eternal but created by God before Creation itself.

Thus he was not fully God by nature and duration —tho' he was not human like other

humans, being more righteous. Arius is described by Karen Armstrong as “a charismatic and handsome presbyter of Alexandria, who had a soft, impressive voice and a strikingly melancholic face.” (He hardly seems troublesome!) He didn’t deny the divinity of Christ, but he pointed to Jesus’s comment that the Father was greater than he. At the time he promulgated this, there was no such thing as orthodoxy, so technically he wasn’t “heretical.” His position, however, created a tremendous controversy in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, tho’ it was inevitable. Arius’s point seems almost obvious, orthodox or not. Nevertheless Arius was violently opposed by Athanasius, an advocate of Christ’s co-eternity and consubstantiality, i.e. of the same essence as God. (Arius’s feast-day is 2 May.) We are told that Arius had less difficulty persuading followers in Alexandria than Athanasius did!

The emperor Constantine, wanting unity in the newly adopted Christian establishment whatever was decided, called a council in Nicaea in 325 to reconcile, if possible, the conflicting doctrines of the leading churchmen, particularly the teachings of Arius. The upshot was the temporary repudiation of his teachings about the “diminished” divinity of Christ, and his exile. For the sake of theological unity, Athanasius and his followers created a metaphysical mystery. Even Constantine was not satisfied, and eventually Arius and his followers returned. His teachings were temporarily recognized as orthodox. More councils followed.

The Council of Constantinople in 381 saw the triumph of what we acknowledge as the orthodox understanding of the full divinity of Christ under the capable leadership of three fathers from Cappadocia—St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, and St Gregory of Nyssa. What the Cappadocian fathers implied—and where we are now—is that it is the nature of the divine that it cannot really be described or understood; that the Trinity remains a

mystery, beyond rational intellection & criticism. Nevertheless Arianism continued to flourish in Europe among Barbarian converts for at least another hundred years. Gibbon in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire devotes two chapters to the conflicts and slaughter of Arian Christians by their fellows.

[insert quote from Athanasian Creed]

The essence of orthodoxy is right here in these lines. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. the Athanasian Creed, rather than the Nicene Creed, used to be recited in the liturgy of the Church of England. No wonder the churches are empty.

Eastern & Russian Orthodox churches find the Trinity, in Karen Armstrong's words, "an inspiring religious experience. For many western Christians, however, the Trinity is simply baffling." (117). The main theological objection against the doctrine is that it has no explicit referent in scripture, but I want to show you this morning, that it has its roots in scripture. The doctrine is nominally philosophical, admittedly, but it is simply an attempt to identify the various ways God in his love for us "allowed something of himself to become glimpsed" by mankind.

We acknowledge the divine first as Creator: Paul in Acts 14 describes God "who made the heavens and the earth and the sun and all that is in them. . . giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy." The Old Testament seems to be God's stage. God is Creator, but he is the micro-manager. It is God who speaks directly to Moses, Jeremiah, and Hosea. It is God, Yahweh, with whom Abraham negotiates who shall be saved out of the destruction of Sodom. It is God who punishes David; it is God who speaks to young Samuel. It is God who argues w/ Job. It is God whom Isaiah sees in the heavenly throne in 742 BC, who commissions him to prophecy and who promises to redeem Israel.

The Son is mentioned most prominently in the Old Testament in the writings of Isaiah, when the prophet envisages him as Messianic: but his stage is the gospels. "Christ speaks on various occasions of the unity of his relationship with God. In the Upper Room he constantly reminds the disciples of this. "All that the Father has is mine" (John 16). Later he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed"—a key theological passage. And "I ask not only on behalf [of my disciples] who will believe on me through their word, that they all may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us. . . . The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me" (John 17). These words imply a unity of essence as Athanasius and Augustus wanted us to understand, and yet, undeniably, as Arius noticed, they imply a distinction betw. Father and Son, which can be difficult to reconcile w/ orthodoxy. So it falls out that in various periods in Christian history there has appeared a strain of doubt about the full divinity of Christ, as in the age of Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—and our time! Literally speaking, to be a "Christian" means to believe in the divinity of Christ, that he is the Son of God. If you aren't sure about this, then you are harmlessly heretical—or you come to St. John's simply because you like the liturgy!

The Holy Spirit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> way in which God in his love manifested his eternal power to us, is everywhere throughout scripture. It is the agent in our spiritual growth, who is prepared for us to seek God in our holy longing and is waiting to assist us. In Genesis it is the “wind. . . [that] swept over the face of the water” when God began the acts of Creation. When the prophet Joel reports to Israel God’s plan for the nation’s redemption, God says, “Then afterward, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves. . . I will pour out my spirit.” These expressions of joy and hope will come as gifts of the Holy Spirit of God. In Christ’s counsels with his disciples, as they worry about his imminent departure, he reminds them, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.” “You know him, because he abides with you, and will be in [or among] you.”

And as we heard on Pentecost as the disciples gathered together, “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them ability.” After this, Peter preaches to the crowd in Jerusalem, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Paul, writing to the converts in Corinth, elaborates on all the different gifts the Holy Spirit may bring to those who believe.

I could cite more instances to demonstrate how often the Holy Spirit appears to enable the work of the first disciples in their early ministries. Suffice it to say, as Wayne did last Sunday, we are all Pentecostals, potentially empowered by the Holy Spirit to do God’s work of evangelism and healing in this broken world. We may pray to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, but it is prob. more accurate to pray that we may be made aware of it, for it is already with us and in us. How this is so is a divine mystery, but it is a strong feature of our faith.

I don’t believe I have really explained the Trinity, whose components lie beyond rational explanation. I have only tried to document it. It is the unexplainable interrelationship of these active expressions of God’s love for us and his high purpose that sacred history has been made witness to since the beginning of time.

Now we will say the creed that rose out of the deliberations of Nicaea, the creed you have spoken from memory and w/ automation every Sunday of the year for as many years you have been attending a “sacramental” church. This time, pay attention to what you are saying. Observe that more is said about the nature of the Son than about anything else. Now you know why. Amen -hlf.

