

The Glorious Trinity

Preached on Trinity Sunday
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
May 30, 2021
Texts: Rev. 4: 1-11; John 3: 1-15

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, when we celebrate God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is actually the latest major feast to show up on our Liturgical Calendar. In ancient times today would have been the Octave of Pentecost instead. In fact, our Collect, Epistle, and Gospel assigned for the day all pre-date the widespread celebration of Trinity Sunday itself by several centuries. This is why some folks count the “ordinary time” weeks between Trinity Sunday and Advent as the “Sundays after Pentecost” rather than our “Sundays after Trinity.” Different regions adapted Trinity Sunday at different times and different calendars dealt with the readings in different ways.

For just about everyone in the Western Church, however, this time in the calendar marks a shift from walking through our Lord’s life in the Gospels to a focus on applying His example in our own lives. During this second half of the Church Year our readings will take us on a journey of growing in sanctification as we follow the Lord.

But today, as we said, is a celebration of the Holy Trinity. While we see hints at the Trinity as far back as the opening chapters of Genesis, our precise language for our understanding of the Trinity comes from the early Church. The Nicene Creed is the foundational teaching on the Trinity. What we know from Scripture and describe in the Creeds is that we worship one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; yet there is only one God. Furthermore, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father.

Losing this balance and tension is at the root of most heresy in the Church. We tend to fall into one of two extremes. On the one hand we often emphasize the unity of God to the point where we turn the Persons into mere expressions of a single person. You’ll find this in the water/steam/ice analogy where we are told that God is like water that can exist in three forms. The problem with this view is that it loses the distinctions between the Persons. God doesn’t simply change roles in the three Persons. It’s not like he puts on a long white beard to be the Father, changes to a crown of thorns to be the Son, and puts on some dove wings to be the Spirit. No, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father.

On the other hand, we do not have three gods. This is the other error into which we can fall. Despite the distinctions of Persons, we only have one God. Having three gods is what we’re often accused of by Muslims or Jews. Alternatively, some quasi-Christian groups, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons, teach that the Father is the real God

and that the Son and Spirit are lesser divine beings, even gods, but still created by the Father. Neither of these positions are the truth as found in Scripture or confessed in Christian orthodoxy.

But someone may well ask why we even need to discuss this difficult and paradoxical doctrine. “What is the practical application?” one might ask. After all, we all face difficulties in our day-to-day lives where we need some hope and encouragement. What does the perplexing doctrine of the Trinity have to do with our worries about our polarized country or our health, or our often difficult relationships? There also seem to be so many challenges for the Church: the exodus of the young; our loss of moral authority and credibility within the larger culture; internal divisions with little hope of reconciliation; mistrust of those in leadership. With many believing that America is on the verge of a civil war, why are we talking about this arcane subject?

Well, one good reason is that the church, in order to have anything to say to the problems of the world, must present a hope that is truly grounded in reality. If there is not a true community of Persons, possessing unsurpassed holiness, joined in love, from which all reality flows, then our hope for lasting love, peace, reconciliation, and glory is baseless. Violence and strife are just what reality is fundamentally. If the Eastern view is correct, that ultimate reality is impersonal and undifferentiated, then our personhood and individual value is finally an illusion,

Another reason is because the Trinity is necessary for the Gospel we preach to be truly good news. Anglican theologian J.I. Packer wrote: “The Trinity is the basis of the Gospel and the Gospel is a declaration of the Trinity in action.” If we did not have three eternal Persons in the Godhead, we could not say with St. John that God is love. His love for us flows out of the eternal love that has always existed between the three Persons of the Trinity. He did not have to create us to have someone to love or to be loved. Rather, love is essential to his being, and so exists at the very foundation of reality.

Third, if the Son and Spirit were not co-equal and co-eternal to the Father, our Lord Jesus could not truly reconcile us to the Father, nor could the Holy Spirit give us the new birth necessary to enter into that reconciliation. If the Son and Spirit were created, if they are creatures, no matter how much they seemed to be gods to us, they would still be infinitely inferior to the Father and therefore unable to bring us into fellowship with him.

In today’s readings we see the Holy Trinity active in both the beginning of our Christian life, and in its culmination in heaven.

In our reading from Revelation 4, we have St. John’s vision of the heavenly throne room. If you read previous chapters, you see that the voice who calls John to the throne is that of our Lord Jesus. In the next chapter, John sees him as the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world. On the throne, of course, is God the Father. Notice that John refrains from describing his physical characteristics, as is typical when Scripture speaks of the Father. Finally, we see that John is “in the Spirit” when he comes into the throne room, and that he witnesses the Spirit’s presence signified by the heavenly

lamp stand or menorah. We also have the three cries of “holy” in the Sanctus. We sing “holy, holy, holy” because God is Trinity.

This vision of the throne shows us our ultimate destiny as Christians: being in the presence of the Holy Trinity forever. But it also shows us that the glorious mystery of the Trinity should drive us to worship. We were made for worship. Therein lies our true joy. The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that God’s love for us is fundamental to who He is and cannot change. The doctrine of the Trinity also reveals to us the grand plan of our salvation and the renewing of the whole cosmos. We will eternally share in the life of the triune God and be privileged to manifest the glory of the godhead. The Church needing to express this truth is why so much of our hymnody, especially our oldest hymns (like the *Te Deum*), are Trinitarian.

And what about our Gospel passage? Last week, we briefly discussed the Holy Spirit’s role in our new birth, signified in our baptism, as Jesus taught Nicodemus. Today’s Gospel reading is that passage from John 3, right up until the famous John 3:16. When we look at that passage closely we see that all three Persons are present. In the beginning of our passage we read that

there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus recognized that Jesus had come from the Father. Though he didn’t yet realize that Jesus was God the Son, Nicodemus knew that Jesus’s teachings would lead him to the Father. The Son would be the one to reveal the Father to Nicodemus. But what is this language about being “born again?”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered,

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

The new birth Nicodemus needed would come from the Holy Spirit. As we discussed last week for Pentecost, to come to the Father, we need the indwelling and rebirth from the Holy Spirit. This is not something that can be planned or manufactured by man. No amount of discipline or ingenuity on our part will bring this about. Jesus uses the analogy of the wind blowing where it wishes. Both in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New, the word for “Spirit” and “wind” are the same. We

know it exists; we witness its power by its effects; but we cannot control it. It is a work of God.

Later, Jesus says

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

If you remember the story from Numbers 21, the Lord sent a plague of fiery serpents against the Israelites when they rebelled. God had Moses make a bronze serpent, so that anyone who looked up to it would be healed and not die. The means of judgement also became their salvation. Similarly, Jesus became sin for us on the Cross and destroyed the power of sin and death. As we behold Him in faith we are joined with Him as the perfect sacrifice to the Father.

This reveals the love of the Father for us, that he would send his beloved son to be that bronze serpent, lifted up for our salvation. This reveals the love of the Son for the Father and for us that he would willingly take on this rescue mission, joining our nature to His so that we may enjoy communion with the Son and Father through the Spirit forever. And this reveals the love of the Spirit who give us new birth and power to follow the Son.

Whether we are rebels like the Israelites, confused but well-meaning seekers like Nicodemus, or anything else, through the work of each Person of the Trinity, we are reconciled to the one true God, the God who has invited us into his heavenly throne room, uniting us to himself, even as each Divine Person is united to each other. As we continue our journey of spiritual growth in Trinitytide, may we remember that our ability to continue on this path comes from the Triune God, the eternal source of truth, goodness, and beauty and the grace we need to come ever nearer to it.

In the Name...