

SERMON  
June 16, 2019

Ever since Roman Emperor Constantine the Great designated Christianity the official cult of empire and convened the Council of Nicaea to define Christian belief, subscribing to creedal *formulae* has become standard practice, especially since the Reformation. Images of heretics burning at the stake or tortured by the Inquisition are still fresh in our minds, so how are we to take these creedal statements?

How does the concept of the Trinity grab you? One of my first intellectual struggles centered on the doctrine of the Trinity. The whole thing sounded confusing to me—an intellectual contortion invented by some perverse prodigy. The only reason the Trinity did not become a stumbling block was that I had a minister at that time who, on the Sunday following a week of my intellectual wrestling, preached on the topic. What is surprising (in retrospect) is that it was not even Trinity Sunday when she preached on the theme of Trinity. It was if it was meant just for me. And maybe it was.

In her sermon the preacher frankly admitted that her mind could not grasp three-in-one and one-in-three. (What a relief! I wasn't the only numbskull!) Instead she concentrated on the revelation of God to the Jewish people as loving Creator, of God in Christ Jesus as loving Savior, of God as Holy Spirit who personally inspires us day by day. I still remember it almost fifty years later.

Surprising things happen in preaching. Isn't it amazing how when sermon and a particular human need come together on the same day, a remarkable divine/human dialogue takes place? A meeting of heaven and earth... A grace event.... Since that day I have read and studied much, toiled and agonized much, prayed and worshipped much. Today I remain a Trinitarian; however, I confess my mind stretches and creaks, twists and warps, strains and chokes whenever I try to put a neat intellectual net around "God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

So, I am happy these days for the word "mystery." I use the word "mystery" not to denote something about which we know nothing, but to describe a God about whom we know just a little,...and realize that it is only "a little." An ever so precious little! A life changing little!

Historically speaking belief in the Trinity took some time to form. The doctrine of the Trinity was not neatly set down by Jesus, or by that articulate thinker whom we know as the Apostle Paul. Today, Trinity Sunday, does not celebrate an event in Christ's life, nor an event in the church—like Pentecost—but is a later doctrine of the church, first composed in 325 C.E. Which, in turn, was an attempt to conserve the essential core of Christian understanding held by the Apostles.

The first record we have of the word "trinity" (Greek: "*trias*") being used was around 180 C.E. At that stage it did not hold the carefully nuanced meanings that were made *orthodox* by the later councils of the church. But the guts of the faith were there in the earliest Christian communities. Just as it is reflected today

in the Lectionary readings from Romans 5 and John 16. One God in three persons, became standard belief from the fourth century on.

But the word, “person” doesn’t exactly mean an individual, like a “John” or a “Joan” or a “Sam.” The word comes from the Latin “persona” meaning an actor’s mask or sporting a figure or an image. But the Hellenistic mind of the early Church just couldn’t tolerate a “peek-a-boo” kind of God, so they had to delve into ontology— how are these “persons” related? are they the same sort of “being?” or is there some gradation of status?

The Eastern church and the Western church eventually differed on whether the Holy Spirit “proceeded from the Father” or “from the Father and the Son”, but in most ways there was a common mind—much like a three-bean salad that my minister described: each bean is the same genus, looks and tastes different, but together they make up a distinctly flavored concoction! The Trinity guarded the core truths of Christian faith and practice—One God, revealed to us in Christ Jesus and working in us through the Spirit. God is always too big for our little minds. Whenever we try to spell out the notion of the Trinity, most of us, maybe all of us, end up verging on heresy.

At times I worry about the way some Christians speak of the persons of the Trinity. Too often, in popular Christianity, I encounter not trinitarianism but tri-theism; that is, three-distinct gods. Which means Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father are three separate entities who sometimes agree when meeting together in council. When this happens, I fear the notion of Trinity becoming a Pantheon. But as long as these folk—who verge on tri-theism—bear the fruits of Christ, my praying for them and with them may be more beneficial than worrying about them. No doubt there are other Christians who worry about me. Perhaps, I stray into Unitarianism? or maybe the ancient heresy of modalism—where God just changes the mask he’s wearing?

Despite these concerns, something priceless has been revealed to us. That little we do know about God (by God’s initiative) is summed up in the Trinity. And that revealed knowledge, though little, defines and shapes Christian people with an understanding of the world and our place in it that is distinctively ours. Whenever we dialogue with others—secular people or other religions—we dare not minimize the loving God, who awesomely shines beyond those words: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” If we do, we will have traded in the only thing that makes us what we are as Christians.

God is the ultimate Mystery. We believe what we believe...by God’s graciously doing us a favor. We respect Jews...but we are not Jews. We respect Moslems...but we are not Islamic. We respect Buddhists and Hindus, but we are not them either. We are *Christians*. It is the light we have been given at our origins and which is reinforced through the ongoing experience of the Christian community. We must witness to that light and allow God to use our witness in whatever ways are divinely appropriate.

Would we fare better at evangelism if our teaching did not hold at its core such a subtle, yet complex principle? I doubt it. When it comes to the crunch, I do not believe there are people who reject Christianity because of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rejection usually has other causes—They might reject Christianity

because Christ asks too much of them. They might reject it because the deeds of some Christian people don't closely match what they profess. They might reject it because they have been brainwashed by secular ways of thinking. They might reject Christianity because of the disunity of the churches. They might reject faith because it would mean giving up some cherished notion. They might reject it because they find it hard to believe in a God of love when there is so much suffering in the world. But not once—not ever in my experience—have I found a person who rejects our message solely because of the Trinity.

As a Trinitarian I will not recoil from this blessed, three-pronged, smidgeon of knowledge. The doctrine of the Trinity may sound academic and awkward, but behind it lies a remarkable and beautiful God who is fundamentally and intimately here for us in creation and redemption and future well-being. It is a belief that prepares us for adventure. At its heart, Trinitarian faith is more about being loved and loving in response, than about a carefully nuanced formula. A love to share, not a doctrine to dissect. Trinitarian belief is for practitioners, not analysts. A guide for adventurers, not armchair theoreticians. Come, sisters and brothers, let us continue this adventure together.