

Trinity Sunday – May 27, 2018

Today is Trinity Sunday! It is the first Sunday after Pentecost which is 50 days after Easter. NOTE: Mention that not all Christians are Trinitarians - give examples.

Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday in the Christian Calendar which celebrates a doctrine. As Anglicans we tend to focus on the three legged stool - scripture, tradition and reason rather than doctrine. And doctrine by its nature is an abstraction and a challenge to communicate. Perhaps another reason is that the word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible. Although, that’s not that unusual because there are a number of theological concepts not found explicitly in the Bible that scholars and Church history and tradition have validated over the past 2,000 years.

Throughout history there have been more heretical teaching on the Trinity than just about anything else – consider this list: Arianism, Semi-Arianism, Modalism, Gnosticism, Unitarianism, Docetism, Nestorianism – just to name a few. Unfortunately, these teachings provided a distorted view of God.

Today, the doctrine of the Trinity is usually presented by the phrase: “One God in Three Persons” — or three-in-one. However, it has been difficult for Christians from the early church down to the present to actually explain what that means.

Many attempts have failed miserably to capture the three-in-oneness of God. These imperfect attempts to define the Trinity became early Christian heresies – you may recall that a heresy is a doctrine or teaching that is incompatible with the Church’s view of Scripture. As I’m sure you know those charged with heresy often found life a bit more than uncomfortable.

The two primary heresies about the Trinity, although there are more than two, are modalism and subordinationism. First modalism: there were those who said that God was One God who just appeared in three different roles — or modalities — as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A good illustration of this is an analogy we hear used today: I’m a son, a brother, a father – you get the idea – it’s an easy idea to grasp. So, I am one person in three roles. But while this sort of gets at one aspect of the Trinity, it is actually a good example of the heresy of “modalism” — one god playing three different parts.

The other heresy is that God the Father is the supreme figure, while both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to Him in some way. There is some logic to it: generally we think of a son as subordinate to a father but this is not what the Bible actually teaches about the relationship between the three persons of the trinity.

So, in order to correct the theological conversation, the early Church developed creedal statements that expressed what the Church believed. The first was the Apostles’ Creed, which we recently examined in EfM – always like to EfM. The Apostles’ Creed simply affirms in

three statements a belief in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

2. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;

3. I believe in the Holy Spirit.

But The Apostles' Creed left the door open for misunderstanding about the Trinity, so the Nicene Creed was developed. The Nicene Creed is a statement of belief widely used in Christian liturgy. It is called Nicene because it was originally adopted in the city of Nicaea by the First Council of Nicaea in 325. In 381, it was amended at the First Council of Constantinople, and the amended form is referred to as the Nicene or the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

It remains the only statement of faith that is accepted by all major parts of the Christian faith and is common to the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Communion, to all the Eastern Churches separated from Rome, and to most of the Protestant denominations. It's a creed you are familiar with and addresses the issue of "one God" very directly:

- We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
- We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not

made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.

- For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.
- For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.
- On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
- He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.
- We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.
- We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Note the detailed explanation of the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. These details were included to correct the notion that God the Father was superior to God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. The “essence” of all three persons of the Godhead was, in other words, the same.

There have been numerous attempts over the years to provide a less theological explanation for the trinity. Several years ago, an interesting book titled *The Shack* which became a bestseller. The story was compelling, but

one aspect of that book sparked discussion and disagreement among Christians. William Paul Young represented the Trinity in a very unique way.

For God the Father, Young portrayed God as a large black woman, who was outgoing, warm-hearted, and kind. For God the Holy Spirit, Young's persona was that of an Asian woman dressed in bright colors who seemed to dart in and out of sight in a Tinkerbell-like fashion. For Jesus, the author pretty much stayed with the stereotype of Jesus as a workman, complete with jeans, flannel shirt, and a tool belt. Each of these personas of God exhibited unique characteristics, and each had a specific role to play in the fictional story. The presentation was a bit of a stretch but what drew the most attention was how they communicated with each other and that there was no boundary between them. They always knew what the other knew.

I suspect it will remain a challenge to get our hearts and heads around the idea of three-in-one and that we can count on other authors to attempt to provide illustrations for us to consider in the future.

However, what is important is to understand is that a more complete understanding of the Trinity requires us to look at what God has done in the past and what He is doing in the world today. That means we need to use the whole bible to get a complete picture - let me give you some examples.

In the Old Testament, God is Creator of both the world, and of the nation of Israel through whom he will bless the

world. Of course, God is present as Spirit, and the Messiah is both prophesied and foreshadowed in various ways. But primary on the stage of the unfolding drama of the Old Testament is the God of Israel.

In the New Testament Gospels, the emphasis is on Jesus — his birth, his baptism, his message, his life, his death, and his resurrection. But God the Father interacts and approves his Son, and the Holy Spirit descends upon and anoints Jesus for ministry. In the New Testament Book of Acts and the epistles, the Holy Spirit is at the forefront, equipping, enabling, guiding, empowering the early church.

And in the Book of Revelation, God the Father, Son, and Spirit are all present, each featured in a way that is both consistent with the Old Testament, witnesses to the New Testament, and brings fully into being the Kingdom of God in its closing chapters.

So what else can we learn from an enhanced understanding of the Trinity?

First, in the doctrine of the Trinity, we find our model for community. As God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit relate to one another, they demonstrate love for each other, and work in concert to accomplish the purpose of God in the world: we get the idea of community.

Second, in the doctrine of the Trinity, we find our mission. Jesus stated to the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” Just as God the Father sent Jesus into the

world, so Jesus sends us into the world to do the Father's work, equipped and accompanied by the Spirit of God.

As we put our faith into action, we need to avoid focusing on only one aspect God's role or portraying God as having only our favorite attributes. We must worship all of God, not just what we like. We have a God that created us – that came as one of us – who knows what it means to be human. We have a God that is with us... always... *to the end of the age.*

So whatever work we have to do in this world, we do from the standpoint of the Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — who created, redeemed, and enabled us to do so.

So, let me encourage you today to think about the Trinity — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But not just as a theological concept. As followers of Jesus, we are loved by the Father, and led by the Spirit. All three persons of the Godhead are at work in our lives, in the life of this church, and in the life of this world.

Amen