

Trinity Sunday---Year C

When I was studying preaching, I learned that one way to think of the preaching experience is in terms of Myers-Briggs types. You all know there are sixteen types, but there are only four foundational types: the SP, the SJ, the NF, and the NT. The SP's are a sizeable group, but in the church business, we in a sense don't have to worry about the SP's, because they aren't in church. Even less are they in convents. Have you ever met a Sister who was an SP? SP's are out riding their motorcycles or whatever they like to do, but they're not here. Some NT's are in church, but they are the smallest group in the general population only about 3%, and for most practical purposes, like preaching, you can lump them in with the NF's. The SJ's are as numerous as the SP's, and not only that, they are in church, usually the biggest group there. Where the preaching challenge comes is that preachers, at least in our tradition, are usually NF's, with a few NT's. How can the preacher, who is a big picture person, at home in the world of abstract ideas and generalities, reach a congregation more at home in the concrete world? The preacher has to learn to become a story-teller and use concrete examples and even objects.

So what does this have to do with Trinity Sunday? For me at least, any story or concrete example I could give of the Trinity would fall dismally far short of the mystery of the real thing. St. Augustine is reported to have said that it is easier to try to transfer the ocean, bucket by bucket, to the shore than to try to explain the mystery of the Trinity. You know that the Trinity, per se, is not mentioned in any gospel. Of course, Jesus does direct the disciples to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" but there's little help after that in any of the gospels. You won't find much helpful information in the catechism in the back of the Prayer Book either. In answer to the question, "What is the Trinity?" all it says is: "the Trinity is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." There it ends.

The Trinity is not a concept that the mind can easily grasp—this business of three persons in one God. It's amazing to know then that wars were fought over the concept of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed, which we chant each Sunday and major feast day, was practically written in the blood of the people who were martyred over specific words and their translations. But then, I suppose the division in the church today over gay rights is equally strange.

I get a bit better grasp of the Trinity when I look at the historical context in which the idea was developed. The early Christians, as Jews, came from a strongly monotheistic tradition. We have just spent a good part of the Easter season hearing about experiences of the risen Christ. The early Christians experienced the risen Christ as divine. Even before the gospels were written, there were prayers and hymns addressing Jesus as divine. But if Christ is divine, does that mean there are two Gods? When they experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit, it felt divine also. But how could there be three Gods if there is only one God? Although the idea of three gods seemed heretical from the theological point of view, experience speaks stronger than theology or philosophy.

The first seminary course I took was at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. It was a course in early church history. The professor's specialty was study of the arguments that took place in the first few centuries of Christianity. What was the nature of Jesus? Was he human or divine? What was the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son? I went into the course expecting to sympathize with the ones who came to be called heretics, partly because I had read some of Elaine Pagel's work. To my surprise, I found myself to be very Orthodox. The Orthodox view is that Jesus is completely human and completely divine. This makes no sense. It's like some of the ideas we have been studying in quantum physics. An object can be in two places at the same time. Objects actually don't exist without an observer to observe them. What heretics tried to do—and still try to do—is make the nature of Jesus more reasonable. Either Jesus is basically human—a very fine and wise teacher perhaps—and therefore not really divine, or he is divine and therefore was never really human. The Orthodox view that he is both fully human and fully divine forces us to dive into paradox and mystery.

I remember from my childhood singing “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” I of course had no idea of what “persons” were. In modern English, “person” usually means a separate personality. Thus, if anything, I thought the Trinity was a sort of committee of three separate divine beings. I must say that as wonderful as Rublev's icon of the Trinity is, it does tend to reinforce the idea of God as committee. But in both Greek and Latin, the word that gets translated “person” means a mask, such as that worn by an actor in a theater—not as a means of concealment, but as a way of playing different roles. Applying this to the notion of God, the one God is known in three primary ways: as the God of Israel, as the Word and Wisdom of God in

Jesus, and as abiding Spirit. Nowadays, instead of using the word “Father” liturgically, some people are using the term “creator.” “Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit.” I think there is a certain value in that because if we refer to God as “Father,” some will ask “What about God the Mother?” But all of this is word play, perhaps designed to do no more than weary us. Somehow, as I was pondering the mystery of the Trinity, I got to thinking about the labyrinth. One of the first things you usually learn when studying the labyrinth is the difference between a labyrinth and a maze. A maze, because it has obstacles, is meant to make you think. How can I get out of this thing? A labyrinth has no obstacles, but is one continuous path. It is intended to help us dive deeper. Some years ago, one of our Priest Associates was being asked to stand as a candidate for bishop in another diocese. He felt confused by this and asked to come here for a few days retreat. The second day, he went out and walked the labyrinth. He came back in saying, “I still don’t know.” The third day he walked the labyrinth again and returned to the convent in peace and clarity. “I don’t want to be a bishop. I’m happy as a parish priest,” was his settled conclusion. The Trinity is like that. It is not something which can be figured out like a maze. You have to get way, way down into the depths of your life, where you find not so much understanding as revelation and acceptance. The Trinity, like the labyrinth, is not a mystery to be solved but a mystery to be embraced and entered into.