

Trinity Sunday—Year C—June 12, 2022

You probably have heard the jokes about Rectors and senior clergy who “delegate” the preaching to junior clergy and seminarians on Trinity Sunday. Here, what we can do is just not sign up for Trinity Sunday. So it has fallen to my lot to tackle the inexplicable. The Trinity is not a concept which the mind can easily grasp. St. Augustine once said that it is easier to transfer the ocean, bucket by bucket, to the shore than to try to explain the mystery of the Trinity. What does it mean to have one God in three persons? If you ever check the catechism in the back of the Prayer Book, you won’t get much help. In answer to the question “What is the Trinity?” all it says is “The Trinity is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The word “Trinity” is not used in the Bible at all.

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. Nowadays, we argue about gender identity. Then, they argued about theology. There were tremendous arguments. 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, but found myself to be very Orthodox. The Orthodox view is that Jesus is completely human and completely divine. This makes no sense. What the heretics tried to do—and still try to do—is make the nature of Jesus more reasonable. Either Jesus was 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. From a little study of icons I have learned that icons are not religious art, but liturgical art. Liturgical art, as I understand it, is art that is used in worship. It is not just to be looked at, but to be entered into. Iconography is one of the means of entering into Orthodox experience, such as the mystery of the Trinity.

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.

The Trinity is not something which can be figured out with simple logic. You have to get way, way down into the depths of your life, where you find not so much understanding, as acceptance. The Trinity is not a mystery to be solved, but a mystery to be embraced and entered into as one enters into an icon.

The Trinity is often described as relationship. Vicki McGrath has described the Trinity in this way: “If you can picture for a moment the model of an atom: there is a core, a nucleus around which the electrons move—each electron identifiable, yet part of the larger whole—held together by the magnetic force of the nucleus; an intricate dance which contains within itself untold power. This image of the atom captures well the sense of relationship, movement, dynamic energy and power that the Trinitarian idea of God tries to convey—Father, Son, Spirit, all are equal and necessary aspects of God: three faces, three personas, three ways of knowing God, holy and undivided, all held together with the magnetic core of divine love.”

Do you remember *The Shack*, the book many people were reading some years ago? *The Shack* is a peculiar book, but it did help me to think of the Trinity as relationship. The Trinity characters are definitely individuated. They have different well-developed personalities, they look different,

they are of different races: two are female and one is male. However, what really interests them is being unified. So they have formed the perfect community. In one chapter, Mack, who is the main human character, is having breakfast with the Trinity. Mack is trying his best to understand the relationship among the three. “Don’t you have a chain of command?” “Chain of command? That sounds ghastly!” Jesus said. God the Father, who is called “Papa” and is in the form of a large black woman added, “Mack, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command. What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best.”

I think the 4th verse of Hymn 366 gives the best summary of a wise approach to the Trinity:

Holy Father, holy Son, Holy Spirit, Three we name thee,
While in essence only One, undivided God we claim thee;
Then adoring, bend the knee and confess the mystery.