

Trinity Sunday, Year C
May 30, 2010
Epiphany, Winchester
The Reverend Roger E. Nelson

Welcome to Trinity Sunday at the Parish of the Epiphany. No balloons today!! But Trinity Sunday seems to be a favorite of Episcopalians, if for no reason other than we get to sing the great hymn, “Nicea”, number 362, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty”.

During my seven years as curate at Saint Thomas’ in Taunton, this was always a major event because the choir had been founded on Trinity Sunday back in 1883. So it was choir festival and recognition Sunday, and provided a glorious ending to our program year.

Of course, Trinity Sunday is the bane of most Episcopal preachers, which is why I am in the pulpit today, and not Thomas – Rector’s prerogative. Now I would put the best interpretation on this: it is not because Thomas does not know what to say about the Trinity, but that he has wisely chosen to defer to a more experienced preacher, hoping that thirty years of preaching on the Trinity in Saugus has somehow given me more wisdom that has been tested in the fires of the pulpit.

I kept telling Thomas that he should take this Sunday off, in which case we would be celebrating Memorial Day weekend instead of the Trinity. Yet, because it is Memorial Day weekend the crowds are sparse, so any heresy I might utter today will not do too much harm, unless Bishop Gayle Harris or the Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School are with us today.

Well that is enough joking around, trying to avoid as complex and argumentative subject as the Trinity. Let us turn to the question at hand: What is the Trinity and what effect does it have upon our Christian lives?

In essence the Doctrine of the Trinity is simple. There is only one God, but in the substance of that one God, there exists three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the God in whose name we were all baptized; and this is the God who must be acknowledged by every orthodox Christian. The doctrine of the Trinity is what unites us in faith with the Methodists and the Congregationalists down the street, with the Baptists and Roman Catholics on the other side of Winchester center, and also separates us from the Unitarians and the Jews and the Muslims in terms our understanding of God.

Yet, while the essence of this doctrine might be easy to state, it is practically impossible to understand or to explain in human terminology. Theologians and philosophers from the days of the early church to this 21st century have tried to put this doctrine into words that would be intelligible to each succeeding generation.

The classical statement, which still stands as the church’s official definition of the Trinity is the ancient Creed of Saint Athanasius, which can actually be found and read in our

Book of Common Prayer on pages 864-865, in a section called Historical Documents of the Church. I have been known in the past to have the congregation open to these pages and to share with them some of its wording. I will not do that this morning, but I will challenge you on your own to do this before the day is done. Look in your prayer book's Table of Contents, find the section entitled Historical Documents and enjoy. You will see why few preachers today focus on the Creed of Saint Athanasius.

Today, we are much more likely to hear preachers approach the subject of the Trinity by using metaphors or similes. Over the years, Thomas and I have heard many, as I am sure you have also. Some of these can be quite helpful; while others are almost laughable: the three leaf clover, the three visitors who came to Abraham with the promise of a child, the French trefoil so popular in church decoration, the equilateral triangle, three circle interwoven, Harlequin ice cream, water-ice-stream. One of the main problems with many such images is that they are inanimate and not dynamic.

For us today, it is a little easier to begin to fathom the truth of the Trinity by using relational images. Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier has become popular not just because it avoids sexist language, but also because it hints at the dynamic movement and interaction of the persons of the Trinity. And this seems to come closer to our experience of God as Three yet One. Our response to God is more likely to be emotional and relational, than descriptive and analytical. It is in the interaction between two human beings that we come to know one another, that a name takes on meaning and embodiment. So it also is with God. We come to know God, as we experience God in our lives; and God comes to know us through the process of creating, redeeming and sustaining us.

My favorite metaphor is to ask the young persons in Confirmation class to consider me. To my mother I am a son; to my wife I am a husband and to my son I am a father. Yet I am one and the same person, but perceived differently according to the relationship. My love for mother, wife and son is rooted in God's love for me, yet is expressed in various ways and experienced very differently by each of the objects of my love. The essential meaning of the Trinity is to be found more in our experience of God, than in the theology of God.

So to begin to perceive the movement of the Trinity in our lives, both corporately and individually, we need to focus on how God has related to us over the years. In doing so we will without too much difficulty, make a listing of the many times God has related to us as the Father Creator, as the Son Redeemer, and as the Holy Spirit Sanctifier. God is a God of love, who acts in our world and in our lives; so it is in our own spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional and moral lives that God as the Trinity is made for us – for you and for me.

Now, I may have left you somewhat enlightened or totally unenlightened this morning in regards to the doctrine of the Trinity. What I know I have now done is filled the required 8-10 minutes for a sermon. So I will say, at least until next Trinity Sunday: Amen. Farewell. Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

