

Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2017 Matthew 28:16-20

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

Over the last 2,000 years, Christians have disagreed about a lot of theology – sad to say, Christians have even killed each other over issues. Christians still argue about some of them today – even in the Episcopal Church – imagine that. Yet despite all the hateful words and everything else that has been done to keep some views up and some views down – there are a few basic points that Christians *around the world*, regardless of denomination, share and agree on. Among those few things are the Lord's Prayer and the Holy Trinity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And today in many churches – at least in the liturgical churches – we commemorate and celebrate that on Trinity Sunday.

I believe this is the only day in the church year on which we celebrate, not a person or an event, but a doctrine – a doctrine that took a few centuries for the early church to affirm. Some doctrinal matters were quite fluid in the early centuries of Christianity, and one of them was the nature of God. What kind of God do Christians have? How do we understand and know God? (Of course, only God knows God – so we always know God imperfectly.) Who is Jesus and how do we know that identity – where is it given to us? What is the Holy Spirit? Is God a single essence, a unity that has no parts, a unity that is manifest in only one way – and is that confirmed by Holy Scripture? Or, is God a single essence – and this might be hard to grasp – a single essence that is manifest to us in several ways – and is that apparent in and confirmed by Holy Scripture?

These are not esoteric questions that only theologians are concerned with. They are fundamental. What kind of God do you pray to? What kind of God is present in your life? Historically, the answers to questions such as those could make a person a heretic or a faithful believer. These days most of us do not spend any time pondering such matters because they have been settled for us centuries ago – and it is through the prism of such common agreement that we understand God and it is through such agreement that we read and interpret Holy Scripture – and particularly the New Testament.

Trinity Sunday is a point on the church calendar that calls our attention specifically to recognizing and honoring the Holy Trinity. The day was not widely observed until the Middle Ages. The Christian calendar took shape over many centuries – it became not only a chronological schedule of feasts and commemorations to be observed by the faithful – it also became an instructional tool that could educate the faithful about the faith. So Trinity Sunday marks not only the conclusion of our liturgical commemorations of the life of Christ (from Nativity through Ascension), but also the descent of the Holy Spirit that we celebrated last Sunday. Today, on Trinity Sunday, the church celebrates the full revelation of God in the Trinity – and we have the assurance of God manifest to us in three ways, in three entities: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit.

But what of the Trinitarian *doctrine* itself? In pre-Christian times, and even continuing today in some cultures, people worshiped many gods. There were gods for seasons of the year, gods for particular things and tasks, gods for this and gods for that. Each of these gods had limited power. The Jewish faith introduced monotheism: one God. And because the Jesus movement began as a Jewish movement, it naturally inherited monotheism. The Christian God has unlimited power and unlimited scope – our God is universal, eternal, immutable, existing from before time. Yet, our God is not distant from us. Our God has chosen to be manifest to us in various ways – in what we call three persons who exist in a mutual relationship of love: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. God reveals God-ness to us in those entities. That is the way we understand God – as a sacred and Holy

Trinity – coequal persons, yet of one substance. That is the way we talk about the nature of God – and that is the way we pray to God.

Does it seem confusing or outlandish to understand God as appearing to us in three ways? Consider this: there are raindrops, snowflakes, frost, dew, haze, ice, mist, fog, creeks, rivers, lakes, oceans – and it's all water – water is apparent to us in many ways.

The Trinity, then, is a doctrine that early Christians developed to describe the way they met with the living God – the way God was revealed and made apparent to them. The Trinity is the central dogma of Christian theology: that One God exists and is manifest to us in 3 Persons. This is not something that can be demonstrated or proven by human reason. But – we understand this through God's revelation to us in Scripture – we understand this as a true mystery. We accept it on faith.

Now if you look in the Bible you will not find the *word* “Trinity.” It is not a word used in Holy Scripture. But the *concept* of God in Three Persons is there nonetheless – it permeates the New Testament. In the final chapter of Matthew as we just heard, Jesus appeared to his disciples and gave them the great commission: “go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. . . .” The Nicene Creed – the affirmation of faith that we say together after the sermon – was basically developed by church councils in the 4th Century and adopted in the 5th Century. It was a way of putting down *on paper*, once and for all, what Christians believe about God and how God is manifest in 3 Persons. This is a fundamental doctrine of our faith.

The Trinity tells us something about God – what the nature of God is and how God has chosen to reveal God-ness to us, how God has chosen to be present to us. And the Trinity also tells us something *about ourselves* – how *we* experience God – how we relate to God as a divinely immediate and personal entity. From the early Christians we have learned this – that is their testimony – and it has been handed down through scripture and received in faith. We experience God the Father as creator, we experience God the Son as Savior, and we experience God the Holy Spirit as being at work *now* in the world, in the church, in our lives – right now, here. When I pronounce the Benediction at the end of the Eucharist, it is in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So our God does not dwell only in a human construct, in a building, or in a little box. God dwells in us, in God's people, in God's construct. And if we recall the words of the hymn, *St Patrick's Breastplate*, we will learn from that ancient, lyric, and pastoral Celtic theology that God dwells all around us, and that God is alive in nature and in the self.

So today we celebrate the Holy Trinity. And it also is the day on which we celebrate and are thankful for God's *gift to us of knowledge of the divine nature* – how we know and understand God. ✠