

Trinity Sunday - 2013 **A Day Dedicated to A Doctrine**

Dear Friends in Christ and Fellow Believers in the Mystery of the Trinity,

Once again we have come to that special day in the church year that we call “Trinity Sunday.” As I say this, I don’t sense a rush of excitement on your part. “Trinity Sunday” simply doesn’t bring about the same response among believers as Christmas, Easter or even Pentecost. In fact, if mentioning Trinity Sunday brings any response at all, it’s most likely confusion or bewilderment.

And come to think of it, that’s the way it should be. The teachings and the truths on which this Sunday is based are a little confusing and bewildering (actually they are an incomprehensible mystery) so it’s altogether appropriate that you might have a feeling of confusion or bewilderment as we begin talking about the Holy Trinity.

Now before we go any further, let me mention something about Trinity Sunday that you may not have thought about before. Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday in our church year, it is the only major festival in the church calendar that is named for a doctrine, for a teaching of the church. Other special Sundays, like Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Sunday or Pentecost, even Reformation Sunday, are named for events, for something specific that happened in history. We celebrate those Sundays commemorating an important event that took place in the past. But Trinity Sunday is named for something that we believe. Trinity Sunday is: **A Day Dedicated to a Doctrine.**

This would certainly indicate that the doctrine or the teaching involved is uniquely important and significant. And, in fact, the doctrine of the Trinity is, in many ways, one of the most significant teachings of the Christian faith. I’m sure you’ve heard it said that Christianity is one of the three monotheistic religions in the world. Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God. But the divinely inspired Scriptures add a unique facet to our belief in one God. The Bible tells us that the one and only God is made manifest in three persons. In other words there is one God but he has revealed himself in three persons, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. God is three-in-one, one God in three persons.

Jesus himself speaks about the Trinity in today’s Gospel lesson from the 16th chapter of John’s Gospel. This is part of the heart-to-heart talk Jesus had with his disciples on the night he was arrested and brought to trial. Jesus knew that his death was very near, so what he said to his disciples that night was very important. As Jesus speaks, he seems suddenly to interrupt himself.

¹² *“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear.”* The disciples were not yet at a place in their faith or in their understanding to grasp what Jesus still had to teach them. Then Jesus continued, ¹³ *“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.”* In other words Jesus is saying, “The Holy Spirit will continue your education after I’m gone.” After Jesus had died, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, then the disciples would be ready for ‘the rest of the story.’ And it’s the Holy Spirit who would bring them the ‘rest of the story.’ *“He (the Holy Spirit) will not speak on his own; he*

will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. The Holy Spirit would instruct and remind the disciples of God's truth so they could teach those truths to others.

Jesus continues ¹⁴ *He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.* ¹⁵ *All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.* Just as everything Jesus had told the disciples had come from God the Father, so the Holy Spirit would speak only what came from the Father and the Son. This way the disciples would learn the whole council of God.

I wonder just how confusing these sentences were to Jesus' disciples even after three years sitting at Jesus' feet. They were Jewish, and if there's anything the Jews believed without question, it was that God is one. Try to imagine, then, how the disciples, faithful Jews, must have felt that evening. They heard their Master refer to himself, God the Father and the Holy Spirit as if they were one. Jesus was mixing the language in such a way that it seemed he was blending the three persons together as if they were one. How could God be one, yet be referred to by these three names Father, Son and Spirit?

With their knowledge of the Old Testament the disciples had plenty of evidence about the three-in-oneness of God. The second sentence in the Bible, the second sentence of Genesis chapter one mentions the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. All through the Old Testament there are references to the Trinity, some veiled, some not-so-veiled references. Just think of our Old Testament reading for today. God told Moses to instruct Aaron to use a three-fold blessing on the Israelites.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

In his vision of heaven the prophet Isaiah came face-to-face with the angels who sing "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty . . .*" (Isaiah 6:3). Some of the disciples who were with Jesus and heard him speak the words of our text had also been present three years earlier when Jesus was baptized. . . . *At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* (Matthew 3:16-17). Those who were there witnessed the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - all present on that one occasion.

Careful study of the Bible, Old Testament and New, will ultimately lead a person right into the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Nowhere in the Bible is God called the Trinity, because the word "Trinity" doesn't appear in the Bible. This is a term that became part of our Christian vocabulary years after the New Testament was written. Christians could see in Scripture and believe that there was one God in three persons, but they didn't have a name for what they believed. They knew a fact, a reality, but they really couldn't explain it and they didn't have a name for it. But in time they came up with a name, and a very logical one: the Triune God, the Trinity. The word 'tri' means three and 'une' means one. Triune means three-in-one, and the "Tri-Unity" of God is referred to as the Trinity.

Once they named this reality, could they explain it? Could they understand and clarify how God can be One God in Three Persons? No. This is still a mystery for us to this day. The Trinity is, in fact, incomprehensible. God is of such a nature that we can't describe his nature in our ordinary terms. He is an alien life-form beyond our understanding. God is one — indivisible and completely unified; and yet

within God there are three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Scriptures describe this as a reality, but we have to admit that it is impossible to understand. But at least we have a name for this reality: the Trinity.

Following the sermon today, we are going to read through the Athanasian Creed, the section that deals with the Trinity. This creed, which is over 1,400 years old, is the best we can do. It is the best writing we have which collects the Biblical truths about the Trinity. But the Athanasian Creed still doesn't EXPLAIN the Trinity.

God is such a complex entity that he is beyond comprehension or explanation. How he can be three in one remains a mystery. But this is actually a comforting and reassuring teaching. It is evidence that our religion is God-inspired and not man-made. All the man-made religions such as Mormonism or Islam have a very understandable god. If you're going to contrive a religion you will always have a god that's understandable by humans because he is created by humans. Our God is beyond understanding, not the product of man's mind. This isn't something that a person who was making up a religion would come up with, it's not understandable.

Secondly, if there were no mystery in God, nothing about God that we couldn't fully comprehend, he would be a very insignificant god, quite unworthy of worship or praise or honor. I want you to see the wonder we have here. On the one hand, the Trinity stretches our thinking to the limits and still leaves us shaking our heads in limitation. And yet it is this very doctrine of the Trinity that makes it clear God is active and involved in your life and that he has your best interests in mind in all that happens.

Jesus said to his disciples, *"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth . . . He will bring glory to me."* It is the Holy Spirit who still guides us into the truth. God's Word is the truth into which the Holy Spirit guides us and he does this to glorify Jesus. The basic truth of God's Word is the terrifying fact that all people are destined to spend an eternity separated from God. The corruption of sin that taints us from the beginning of our existence is offensive to God who is holy and without sin. Not only do our sins anger God and separate us from God, there's nothing you or I could do to remove these sins and their eternal consequences.

In his incomprehensible love for us, the Triune God implemented a plan to rescue us from what we deserve and bring us through this life into a glorious existence in his presence forevermore. This plan involved Jesus, the second person of the Trinity coming to earth, putting on human flesh and blood and accomplishing our salvation. No longer an alien life form, it was absolutely necessary for God the Son to become one of us.

Hebrews 2, ¹⁴ *Since the children have flesh and blood, (he's talking about you and me) he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--* ¹⁷ *For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might . . . make atonement for the sins of the people.*

As a true human, Jesus was born subject to all of God's divine laws, but as God the Son he was able to keep the law perfectly as a substitute for you and me. Because Jesus was truly human (with a soul and a body) he was able to experience death. But the horrible death by crucifixion which Jesus endured was

sufficient to pay the price for the sins of mankind. Now there is a solution to the sin problem which had doomed humanity to eternal death.

All three persons of the Trinity share in making the treasures of salvation a blessing to you. In his love for you, God the Father found a way to remain a just and holy God who hates every sin and punishes every sin and yet spare you from punishment. In his love for you, God the Son received the punishment intended for your sin. Now, in his love for you, God the Holy Spirit comes to you in Word and Sacrament to create and strengthen faith in Jesus.

Just as Jesus said, (verse 14) *He (the Holy Spirit) will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.* The Holy Spirit's work is to place Jesus before your eyes and into your heart. Jesus is "glorified" in you when the Holy Spirit guides you through God's Word so that you know the truth about Jesus, about his work of redemption, and firmly believe in him. And faith is the key. Whoever believes in Jesus has everlasting life. (John 3:16, Acts 16:31, Ephesians 2:8-9).

A final comforting aspect to having an incomprehensible God is this. Since God is such a complex entity that we can't even understand how he exists, if he is so vastly superior to us as to be incomprehensible, think of how much greater he is than we are in his strength and in his wisdom. The psalmist said it this way . . . *My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.* Psalm 121:2 (NIV). The Triune God who loves you, and provides for you, and watches over you, is the same God who constructed the vast universe. Don't you think he has enough power to protect you from your enemies and to use all things for your good? The wisdom of that same Triune God is displayed from the intricacies of the tiniest sub-atomic particle to the harmonious working of the stars in their galaxies. Do you think you can trust him to know what is best for you?

The Tri-unity, the three-in-oneness of God is a teaching that is incomprehensible. It is a mystery and yet it is a reality. Because it is real, you can have supreme confidence that God is caring for you, protecting and providing for you in this life and he has already prepared a place for you in glory in the life to come. On this Day Dedicated to a Doctrine we praise and thank God for this comforting truth: God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity. Amen.