

Trinity Sunday 2022

During the many years that I was preparing for ordination, I was always honored to be asked to preach.

Each year, Pentecost would come and go, and then things would be more relaxed for a while, so rectors were willing to let a novice preach, or so I thought.

As time passed, however, I began to notice a pattern.

It was not just any day after Pentecost; it was *Trinity Sunday*.

On Trinity Sunday, the lowest “ranking” person was always asked to preach.

When I inquired about this, I was told that it was “good training.”

Over time, I began to realize why many avoided preaching on Trinity Sunday.

It stressed them because they mistakenly believed that, on this day, they had to explain the Trinity, had to make it reasonable.

They did not understand that the Trinity is like a koan.

Defiance of reason is the point.

If one attempts to make the inexplicable clear, one necessarily descends into heresy.

One of the most common heretical explanations, in my experience, is that the Trinity is like water, steam, and ice.

This is the heresy of modalism (also called Sabellianism, because in Theology, one multisyllabic word to remember is never enough).

Modalists claim that God is one person acting differently at different times.

Hence, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are simply God acting in a different mode.

The Trinitarian doctrine, on the other hand, claims that God exists eternally in three co-existent persons.

Modalism was condemned as early as 262 by Dionysius, the Bishop of Rome.

On one Trinity Sunday, I nevertheless heard a bishop descend into the heresy of H₂O modalism as he struggled to explain the Trinity.

The early church spoke of God in terms of mystery for a reason.

In fact, I can think of three advantages to Trinitarian orthodoxy.

First, the Trinitarian koan makes it clear that we cannot fully know or possess God.

To be a Christian is to dwell humbly in the unknowing.

God reveals to us what God wants us to know when God wants us to know it and not a moment sooner.

What God reveals is usually nothing more than the next step, not the endpoint towards which that step is headed, though God may, should God want.

People who think they know God thoroughly, who *always* know what God wants for everyone, have very little understanding of how God works.

Life is a little like standing in line at Disney.

You think you are about to arrive somewhere, but then you turn a corner and find out that there is an entirely new room of winding path ahead.

If we knew the future, we would not make an effort.

We would not grow.

The classroom God has established would fail.

When we think we know God thoroughly, moreover, we are merely mistaking the contents of our own egos for God.

We are projecting, in other words, our own limited assumptions onto the creator of all things.

We become unable to distinguish ourselves from God.

The result is that, rather than loving others, we feel superior to them (as the ones who know God properly) and seek to control others, to tell them how they ought to be.

Once one thinks one is in possession of God, one may do almost anything.

All humility is lost; love is misunderstood as a gift from a demanding God for obedience rather than the substrate of all creation, the thing out of which all that exists has been made.

Christianity proclaims that God is love and that God created all things out of love.

The universe was made by love for love out of love, to paraphrase Julian of Norwich.

To deny love is to turn away from God, to deny God, in other words.

The Doctrine of the Trinity keeps us humbly aware of the mystery of God.

God controls us; we do not control God.

A second advantage of the doctrine of the Trinity is that it demonstrates that God is relational in God's very being.

God does not seek relationship, but *is* relationship and as we are all in God, that means that we are also relational, mutually determining.

God is therefore not about extracting adoration from us.

Instead, God feeds us, nurtures us, loves us.

This is what we experience in the Eucharist.

God feeds us with Godself.

When people reduce Christianity to a theology of individualism, they negate the gospel, the very relational nature of all reality and the God who created it.

People whose ethics stop at individual choice are merely reproducing contemporary American culture and calling it Christian.

When we refuse to acknowledge systemic evil, when we reduce evil to the choice of a lone individual and do not look at our broader responsibilities, we are denying the nature of created reality.

Individualism is popular precisely because it allows us to do nothing while imagining that *we* have it right and others are simply evil.

In reality, the gospel teaches us that we are all mutually responsible, all mutually determining, created by and part of a relational deity.

Even the Old Testament was clear about the responsibility a society bears for what happens within it.

In fact, the prophets taught that the loss of the throne of David was due to systemic evil. We must free ourselves from the reasoning of the world and look to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the Trinity helps us to understand Jesus Christ.

Early in Christian history, people were confused about him.

Eventually, the argument settled into a debate about how long Jesus Christ had been around.

Some argued that he was eternal.

Others argued that *there was a time when he was not*.

In fact, people wrote this as graffiti and even turned it into a rhyming shanty.

There was rioting in the streets and Emperor Constantine wrote a passive aggressive letter asking the governor to restore order so that he could sleep better.

Eventually, the emperor called the Council of Nicaea to resolve the matter.

At Nicaea, as the debate roiled, St. Nicholas is said to have punched Arius in the face.

Arius lost the debate to the Trinitarians, who wrote the creed to make very clear that God and Christ are co-eternal.

As is often the case, the fight was, in fact, unnecessary.

The disagreement between the two factions is not so profound when seen from a higher level.

Simply put, there was indeed a time when Jesus was not, but there was not a time when Christ was not.

Jesus is the temporary incarnation of the Christ, who appeared in flesh in order to get us back on track.

These three effects of the doctrine of the Trinity, reminding us of the mystery of God, the relationality of God, and the eternity of Christ, allow us to focus humbly on our relationship with God and one another.

We see that God is in God's very nature beyond what we can comprehend, but also thoroughly relational.

When we grasp this, we free ourselves from the need to be right and can focus on following God humbly day by day.

We therefore gather together as the church to give thanks to the mystery, to be fed by God, and to rejoice in being a part of God's community.