

Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

Today is Trinity Sunday. With the coming of the Holy Spirit last week at Pentecost, we are in a position to acknowledge all three Persons of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But how do these three Persons remain but one Being? How do we have three Persons but only one God? Why do we even need a Trinitarian God?

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the Christian faith, but it is a mystery in the strictest sense. It cannot be known by the senses apart from revelation, nor demonstrated by reason after it has been revealed. In other words, we wouldn't make this stuff up, and couldn't if we tried. If we were going to make up something about God, this wouldn't be it. What we know of the Holy Trinity, we know because God has chosen to reveal it about God's self.

To begin with, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is unique to Christianity. Only Christians have this belief about God. That makes it a dogma – a teaching that distinguishes one religion from another. Muslims and Jews believe in a strict monotheism, while Hindus have a pantheon. We Christians are the ones who believe in a Trinitarian God. That alone makes knowing something about the Trinity important to Christians. It is part of what defines who we are.

The pivotal statement of the doctrine, the Athanasian Creed, puts it this way: "The Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance." Our faith is defined by our worship of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity came about because the early church was trying to understand its experience of God. How could the Church reconcile the observed facts that there is one God, and that Jesus was God? And what of Jesus' teaching about the comforter, the Holy Spirit? How did all of that fit together?

The result was the Creed of Athanasius, which is neither a creed nor by Athanasius, but other than that is a fine title. If you read it (it is on page 864 in the BCP) you will find it to be a repetition of putting the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together and then separating them again. This tends to be the struggle with the concept of God as a Trinity – how do we keep the Persons separate but the Being one, all without falling into heresy on one side or the other?

One error we make is making too much of a division. Some people think that in the Old Testament we have God the Father, in the New Testament God puts on the mask of the Son, and now we have the Holy Spirit. Actually, that is a heresy. Its technical name is modalism, and it is widespread among Christian believers. The Trinity is not three different masks that God

wears at different times in history. From all eternity, before there was a world, before there was anything, there was God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in a bond of unity and love and community that exceeds our ability to comprehend or describe.

Modalism tries too hard to keep one being. The other extreme is to make too much distinction between the persons. One heretic, named Marcion, did it this way. His idea was that he liked the God of Jesus. He is a God of love and mercy; a God of tenderness. Not like the God of the Old Testament. So forget the Old Testament. Marcion cut it out of the bible.

He taught that the God of the Old Testament was a demigod. He was a creator, but he wasn't GOD. But the Church said, no, you can't do that. There is one God. So the first thing the Church affirmed was that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. This means that there is a fundamental connection between creation and redemption.

But there still remained the problem of there being one God and at the same time knowing Jesus as Lord. One fellow named Arius took a stab at it. Arius tried to make sense of the one God/Jesus is Lord problem by saying that Jesus was the first creation of God the Father. Arius denied that the Son was of the same essence as the Father. At the council of Nicaea, the Church said we can't do that either. The one we adore and worship and love in Jesus our Redeemer is of the same essence as the Father. We are not talking about two different Gods here. There is one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The fundamental identity of God, then, is relationship, community.

About seventy years after the council of Nicaea, some people said that they could go along with God the Father and God the Son, but they couldn't get behind God the Holy Spirit. They believed that the Holy Spirit was a force, an energy, a power even, but it wasn't God. But the Church teaches that it is the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets; it was God's spirit that moved over the waters at creation; it was God's spirit that breathed life into creation. It was more than some ephemeral power, the Holy Spirit was personal; the Holy Spirit is God. The Church declares that God is one in essence, and three in persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God does not exist alone. God exists in community. God is the source of relationship and love. God is love; which is not the same thing at all as saying that love is God. God is the source and the identity of love. The Godhead, the very essence, the foundation of God, is love and community, relationship. God is quite capable of relationship without us. And yet, God invites us into that relationship; to have a relationship with God. In fact, we were created with just that idea in mind. We were created so that we might be in communion with God.

Think about it. All of creation exists so that we can exist and can exist in relationship with God. God does everything that can be done to make that relationship possible, even to the point of becoming part of that creation. Far from being two different Gods – a creator and a redeemer, God is one – our creator, redeemer, and sustainer; because God wants to share the beauty of that relationship with us.

Ultimately, we have to admit that the Trinity is a mystery. Even in eternity, we will never comprehend it. But as St. Augustine said, we must say something about it because we can't say nothing about it. The good news is we don't have to understand it. But we are called to affirm it and to believe it because it is the foundation of our faith. It is the source of our life and our love. It is the foundation of our faith. Without a Trinity, there can be no Jesus. Without Jesus, there can be no redemption. Without a Trinity, there can be no Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, we are left without a comforter.

It doesn't bother me that I don't understand the nature of God. What is important is that God understands us. God knows that we need relationship and community. God created us that way. God created us to crave what God is by God's very nature. And through the Incarnation of the Son, God has made it possible for us to be in communion with God and with each other just like we were meant to be. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*