

Holy Trinity May 26 - Acts 2:14a, 22-36 42, Isaiah 6:1-8, John 3: 1-17

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God, neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the substance. (Athanasian Creed)

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday, the last of the festival days. It's the day we dust off that venerable Athanasian Creed, named after St. Athanasius, the great confessor and defender of the Nicene orthodoxy, who was banished from his own pulpit five times defending the great truth: that God is three and one at the same time. Three distinct persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Yet, there is only one God in essence. And there is no other god than this God.

The Tri-unity of God is a paradox. A paradox is holding two seemingly contradictory things at once. The word "tri-une" itself is paradoxical. Three yet one, one yet three. Christianity revels in paradox. God is three and one. Jesus Christ is true God and at the same time true man. A justified believer is both sinless and sinner. It's all a paradox. In a world that demands a tidy either/or answer for anything, Christianity comes with a "both/and."

Three divine Persons, one divine Being called God. Let's be honest. If we were inventing a god and a religion, we wouldn't go this way. We'd keep things simple. Religion is hard enough to market in a secular world. Why make things more difficult than they have to be? The trouble with that is we don't make up our ideas of God. God tells us who He is.

We must take the triunity of God seriously for this one reason: Jesus revealed it. He's the One who died and rose from the dead, remember, and so whatever Jesus says runs the show. Jesus is the one who prayed to His Father and yet said, "I and the Father are one." Jesus claimed to be sent by the Father as the only -begotten Son of God, and yet He said that to see and have Him was to see and have the Father. He promised that He and the Father would send the Holy Spirit, who would take what He received from the Father and hand it to Jesus' disciples. He commanded His disciples to make disciples of all the nations by baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them everything He had entrusted to them.

That's why we have Holy Trinity Sunday or the three creeds we confess. That's why we bother to rehearse something like the Athanasian Creed with all its eternal, uncreateds, incomprehensibles, and threats of hellfire to all who don't believe it. It's because this is the God that Jesus revealed to the world—three distinct Persons and yet only One, undivided God—a paradox.

This may all seem like so much doctrinal hairsplitting to some. The Athanasian creed might seem like an exercise in hairsplitting. Doesn't the Bible keep things nice and simple? Is this all really necessary? Couldn't we "just believe in Jesus" and let it go at that. "Doctrine divides," people say. It's never a healthy sign when the church, or baptized believers for that matter, abandon any interest in doctrine and turn to their own spiritual experiences. It's a sign that the church has grown lazy and distracted. The creeds didn't cause divisions; they identified, labeled, and diagnosed the divisions. Doctrinal indifference has never strengthened the church; it always weakens it.

GK Chesterton, the Christian writer and apologist, said this about his own contemporary disinterest in doctrine:

"In all the mess of modern thoughtlessness, that still calls itself modern thought, there is perhaps nothing so stupendously stupid as the common saying, "Religion can never depend on minute disputes about doctrine." It is like saying that life can never depend on minute disputes about medicine. The man who is content to say, "We do not want theologians splitting hairs," will doubtless be content to go on and say, "We do not want surgeons splitting filaments more delicate than hairs." It is a fact that many a man would be dead today if his doctors had not debated fine shades about doctoring. It is also the fact the European civilization would be dead today if its doctors of divinity had not debated fine shades about doctrine." (*The Resurrection of Rome*)

We might add to Chesterton that our civilizations are dying and may already be dead because we no longer take an interest in the fine points of doctrine. What Chesterton called "the mess of modern thoughtlessness" has become a culture of "dummies." There are even books titled "Christianity for Dummies" and "The Bible for Dummies." When you no longer believe anything faithfully and firmly, the fine points of doctrine are no longer worth fighting for.

So, what do we do with this paradox of God's tri-unity? What does it mean for us beyond the fact that God can't easily be pictured, and the best we can do are triangles and St. Patrick's three leaf clovers?

First, it means that God Himself is never alone. He is in communion - the Father in communion with the Son in communion with the Holy Spirit. When God made man in the beginning, He said, "Let us make man in our image." Creation is a divine committee job, a collaboration of the Father's ideas, the Son's Word, and the Spirit's breath and life, all working together. And that still doesn't quite catch the fullness of the paradox. But at the level of our human language, it's the best we can do. It's one reason, I believe, that it was not good for the man to be alone when he was created and why God separated male and female and made them two separate beings. We are made to be in community and in communion as God Himself is in communion.

Second, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God's Wisdom, the Word, orders everything. In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom takes on a person and speaks (in a feminine voice because the word for "wisdom" is feminine). Wisdom was with God in the beginning, appointed from eternity, before creation. Wisdom was the craftsman at God's side, His right hand, rejoicing in His whole world and delighting in mankind.

All of science and mathematics are celebrations of this wisdom that made all things and gave everything order and place. The laws of science exist because the Wisdom of God brought order out of random chaos. That's how I used to view things as a scientist who was also a believer. The whole reason we can even speak of scientific laws and principles is that the universe operates by divine Wisdom. God is a God of order, and He makes things in order.

In the New Testament, we meet God's Wisdom face to face in the person of Jesus. He is the Word Incarnate, the Word made flesh, the Word through whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together and have their being. He's called the "first-born" of the creation, the image (icon) of the invisible God, the fulness of God dwelling in human flesh. To know Jesus is to know the ordering Wisdom of the universe in a personal way.

Imagine seeing a magnificent building, a structure that commands your attention. It makes you want to know who built it? Who designed it? Take a long, meditative look at your hand. Wiggle each finger. Flex each joint. Take note of the muscles, tendons, and blood vessels.

Notice the shape and size of each finger. How do you think that hand came to be? By accident? A quirk of nature? Luck? Of course not! It's the Father's design, the Son's execution, the Spirit's life that made this hand and keeps it going.

Jesus told His disciples, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear." And those guys spent three years of "quality time" with Jesus. Literally walking and talking and eating with Him. And they still can't bear all that He has to say. And so never think that you've exhausted everything. You may have read the Bible a dozen times all the way through, from Genesis to Revelation, and you still don't know everything there is to know. You may have memorized the catechism, gone to Lutheran schools, studied under the best teachers, and have enough degrees to wallpaper a bathroom, but you're still only scratching the surface. Jesus promises more to come. There's always more with Jesus until we finally hit the "all," the fullness of what the Father has given to the Son who gives us by His Spirit.

Third, the doctrine of the Trinity describes our relationship with God. It's a triune relationship in union with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That's how it began at our baptism "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The apostle Paul says, "Thanks to Jesus and the justification that came through His death and resurrection, we now have peace with God through Christ and access through faith."

God has made peace with the world, with each and every one of you, in the death of Jesus, His Son. And trusting that peace, we have access to the Father through His Son. Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." And in His death on the cross, He drew all things to Himself and presented the whole creation to the Father as died for, redeemed. The disaster of human sin, including the contribution each of us makes, has been answered in the blood of Jesus. And now, by that blood, we have access. The Father is accessible. We can come to Him as dear children coming to their dear Father with boldness and confidence. In Christ, we are part of the family. And God has poured out His Spirit on us, in our Baptism and whenever we hear His Word. The Spirit reveals the love of God to our own hearts so that we are able to say, "our Father."

Every prayer concerns the triunity of God. We pray to the Father. We pray through the Son, through His priesthood, His sacrificial death, and His blood. And we

pray in the Holy Spirit, who reveals Jesus Christ to us, works faith in our hearts, and delivers our words to God's ear.

The tri-unity of God is our life with God. We are children of the heavenly Father. We are brothers and sisters of God's only-begotten Son, Jesus, our Savior. The Holy Spirit is our Comforter, Advocate, and Guide. We are always surrounded by the three Persons of our one and only God, who made us, saved us, restored us, and made us holy in Himself.

That has practical consequences, too. This isn't some theological abstraction in a book. We rejoice. We rejoice that we will share in the glory of God and already do by faith. And we rejoice even in our sufferings. That's right, even in suffering, because God is in the middle of all of it. He made us, He redeemed us, He keeps us going. He's not going to abandon us when things get rough. He will see us through. Not around, though. And through whatever it is we're asked to go, whether sickness or persecution or hardship or struggle, the Triune God is at work producing patient endurance, building character, and creating hope in our hearts that will not disappoint. Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the Undivided Unity. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.