

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009

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The feast of Trinity was begun by Bishop Stephen of Liege in Belgium in the early 900s. He believed that the cardinal doctrine of the faith deserved its own day! In a short time it became popular in England, though it was slower to take root in other places.

Trinity Sunday brings the church year to its logical climax. We began the Christian revelation with the knowledge that there is one God, the Father. In the celebrations of Christmas through Ascension, God the Son was revealed. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended. Trinity sums it up. There is one God who exists from eternity in three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The common objection to the Trinity is that the doctrine is hard to understand. How can three be one and one be three? But the more I've thought about it over the years, the more I've realized that the Trinity really makes sense—even if it is hard to understand.

1 John 4:8 says that “God is love,” a truth to which most will give their assent. If we think about it for a minute, we will realize that love requires more than one. Love is not merely an abstract principle or an undirected sentiment. To say that God is love must mean that God is a lover. And if God is a lover, then there must be an object of his love—for narcissism is not love.

Now, we might think that God created the world in order to have something to love. But this would mean that God is not complete within himself. This would mean that God needed something outside of himself to make him whole. A needy god is the god of paganism, a god made in our own image.

The Trinity tells us that God is, within himself, a relationship of love. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father and the Holy Spirit is the personification of the love that flows between them and from them to us. A unitarian god might have been lonely and might have needed to create someone to love. But the Trinitarian God is full of love within himself. He created the world, with the motive of love, to share what he already had with us.

The Trinity also makes sense of the different aspects of God's being. What is God like? Is he transcendent and glorious beyond all human comprehension? Or, does he reveal himself in ways that we can see and rationally comprehend? Or, is he near us so that we can feel and experience his presence? The Trinitarian answer to all these questions is, Yes.

There is always a risk assigning divine attributes to one person of the Trinity, for all the persons are all knowing, everywhere present and all powerful. Yet, generally, when we think of the Father we think of transcendence. He is the God who has no form, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man can see and live. He is the God who passes human knowledge.

When we think of the Son, we generally, think of revelation. The Father, who passes comprehension, is known through the Son, who is the image of the Father (Colossians 1:15), who makes the Father known in comprehensible ways.

When we think of the Spirit, we think of intimate communion with God. Through the Spirit we feel and experience the presence of God in our lives each day. Through the Spirit, the transcendent God, who is exalted far above all things, becomes locally present in the human heart.

Error in the spiritual life results when we emphasize one aspect of God's being to the exclusion of the others. When the transcendent is overemphasized, we have awe, fear and reverence, but not knowledge or personal experience. When the rational revelation is overemphasized, we have propositional truth but mystery and no experience. When the intimate, personal experience is overemphasized, truth and reverence are often the casualties.

Meditation on the mystery of the Trinity provides us with balance in the life of prayer. Meditation on God's transcendence guards against an overly subjective faith. Meditation on the immanent presence of the Spirit guards against the idea that God is distant. Meditation on the Son roots our experience in truth and helps us to know the unknowable.

The liturgy is expressly Trinitarian. There is an obvious focus on transcendence, on the God who is holy and whom we must approach with reverence and awe. But there is also focus on revelation as the transcendent God is revealed through his word. And then there is a focus on the immanent and experiential as we literally receive God into our bodies in the sacrament. The transcendent Father is revealed through the Incarnate Son and is experienced through the indwelling Spirit.

We talk about living a life of prayer that consists of three parts: the Eucharist, the daily offices and conversational prayer. All these forms are Trinitarian. However, one author suggests that there is an emphasis on the daily office being "given to God Almighty," on the Eucharist centered on our Lord Jesus Christ and on private prayers being inspired by the Holy Spirit (*Christian Proficiency*, Thornton 18). Whether or not one completely accepts these points of emphasis, it is clear that the doctrine of the Trinity leads us to balance in the life of prayer—and that is why it makes sense.

How sad it would be if God were transcendent, but could not be known and experienced. How sad it would also be if God were such that we could know everything about him, with no enduring mystery to pursue. And how sad it would be if there was nothing greater than my personal experience.

St. Paul talks about knowing "the love of Christ which passes knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19). This is the glory and mystery of the Trinity. We can know the love of God, but there is also more to God than we can know. What makes the promise of resurrection and life in the world to come most exciting is the prospect that there will be an eternity to unpack and experience the true meaning of Trinitarian love.

This is the love that God has within his own being: glorious, mysterious, transcendent, unbounded, passing comprehension, yet knowable through the Son in the Holy Spirit. This is the relationship of love that God brought us into when we were born again of water and the Holy Spirit and enabled to see, ever so dimly, the kingdom.

It all makes sense, even if we can't completely understand it!

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