

Trinity Sunday 2015 Sermon Notes:

Today as you may know is a day of celebration in the church calendar. But unlike other days of celebration or feast days in the church this day does not seek to remember the faith, work and sacrifice of an individual, like the Feast day of St Stephen celebrated on Boxing Day, or an event in the life of Jesus, like his Ascension we honored a couple of weeks ago or a celebration of a gift from God, like we celebrated last week with Pentecost. Today we celebrate something more nebulous, something that is an idea. A concept of the greatest centrality to our belief system as Christians and as Episcopalians and yet incredibly challenging to define let alone completely understand. Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday, a celebration and remembrance of God as Three-in-One.

The Trinity

The Gospel lesson of John points to the concept of the Trinity among other things. Nowhere in the Gospel or other sacred texts of the New Testament do we come across the term Trinity or variations of it, yet we now hold this concept as an identifying marker of what we believe or at the very least struggle to understand. It is the central doctrine of the Church and “is an essential expression of a believer’s faith (Gomes 102).” This idea of the Trinity or Trinitarian theology represents the words and human struggle to understand the relationship between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and our relationship with all three...

It is and has been recognized by religious thinkers as one of the greatest challenges in our faith to comprehend. Evangelist and theologian, John Wesley said of the Trinity, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the triune God.” [So why do we celebrate this concept and do so today? Why this Gospel reading that features the teacher, Nicodemus? What does this doctrine mean to us?]

Trinity Sunday is celebrated the week after the day of Pentecost where the voices become one and we are given the Spirit. It seems to make sense that after we celebrate the birth and death of Christ, followed by his Resurrection and Ascension, concluding with Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit that we can now

celebrate all three, Father, Son, and HS together. In thinking about the Trinity, I often feel like a one year old celebrating his first birthday. There is cake; there is incredible stimulus, balloons and singing, a silly hat on my head. I like it. But I don't have a clue as to what is going on.

The idea of Trinity was born out of efforts of the early church to seek to "understand" and to find ways to remain unified in this relatively new and rapidly growing religion. One effort to gain order and understanding takes us back centuries, to a time right after great persecution of Christians had ended. Through the efforts of Bishops and leaders of the church an understanding centered on "defining" the elements of the faith, including the Trinity, giving us the Nicene Creed.

Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is most central to our belief system as Christians in the Episcopal tradition. Like the Trinity it also serves a similar purpose for our Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox brothers and sisters, to name a few. Our creeds—I hold up the Nicene Creed now, was the result of efforts to define, shape and maintain control of the early church by its leadership over 1,600 years ago. The creed was defined by Bishops that came together, from all parts world, at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and was completed in 381 CE at the Council of Constantinople.

In this time over 300 bishops hammered out the creed in response to what many thought to be challenges to the authority of the church leadership and the divinity of God. The calling of this council was in part a response to Arianism, a philosophy of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius that denied Jesus' full divinity. Arianism was viewed as a heresy by those at Nicaea. Much debate 1,600 years ago was about the relationship of the Son to the Father, the Father to the Son and the relationship and nature of the Holy Spirit.

On top of this, much debate has centered on the nature of Jesus. Was he just a holy man? According to Docetism, deemed a heresy, Jesus only acted the part of man but was really a heavenly being that took on the form of man. The 4th C.

Macedonian heresy denied the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. The heresy controversies during and around this time are too numerous to detail here but fascinating non-the-less.

We are beneficiaries of the toils, tears, blood and sweat of the early church leaders. The intellectual heavy weights of the time and since have sought to understand the concept of the Trinity. We are left to using earthly language to define the Divine. The very nature of things divine suggest an unknowing. All this is to say that in time we will come to understand but for now, much of the divinely inspired text of the Bible will remain a mystery.

This is not an invitation not to engage these bigger thoughts; on the contrary, it is an invitation for us to plumb the depths of our Christian theology. It is when we engage in such debates, when we engage ourselves with internal questioning that we grow closer to God.

Nicodemus

Beyond serving as a catalyst to our understanding of the Trinity, the story of Nicodemus is bursting with great meaning. This chapter contains perhaps the most recognizable bible verse—in John 3:16. Outside of this, hallmarks of the Gospel of John are the multiple messages contained in many of the accounts of the life of our Savior. The richness contained in Scripture and the levels of depth we can go in our study of Scripture speaks to the incredible value of it. Scripture meets us where we are and yet offers a challenge for us to go further.

But today we look at this passage, half dialogue, half monologue to think about the Trinity. We explore it not so much as to describe it; rather we do so in order to become personally responsible for our understanding. It is through Nicodemus that we, the intended audience, are exposed to what it takes to enter the Kingdom of God and how the Holy Spirit enters into this process of being born again, born from above. Nicodemus is challenged by the language as much as he is challenged by the concept of the Spirit.

As many of you learned from Nate Ransmayer's series on the writing of the Hebrew Scriptures, the translation of sacred text is fraught with many challenges,

especially when a word does not exist in one's language. This is illuminated in v. 3, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Other translations, like the NIV, substitute "from above" with "again." The double meaning, as found in the original Greek, possess a challenge for both Nicodemus and us. The Greek word "anothen" is the word used in the original language of this text. "Again" is the word privileged by the translator of the NIV text, yet the footnote mentions another word with different meaning, and that is the word from "above." In the NRSV translation which we use has the word "above." We lack an equivalent word in English and so one gets privileged. It is the "above" language, the divine language that Nicodemus struggles with, even being a teacher, a member of the intellectual elite he struggles with the role of the Spirit in our salvation. He is trying to understand just like us. Jesus attempts other ways to make himself clear to Nicodemus when he speaks of being "born or begotten of water and spirit" and that one believes "in the wind without understanding its workings." However, Nicodemus is unable to comprehend the mystery of the Trinity. His heart is honest and despite his struggles, he remains present. He is not put off. We will hear of him again in the Gospel of John when he joins Joseph of Arimathea to collect and prepare the body of Christ for burial.

There is virtue in the struggle that is often not readily apparent...The words we use and the way we understand the relationship between Father and Son and Spirit are our way of making meaning. With our crustacean minds we too seek to understand like Nicodemus or Thomas for that matter. (Is Jesus fully man? Is he fully human? Is he equal in importance to the Holy Spirit? Why do we have the HS in the first place when we have God and his Son? How does the church know these things to be true? What is my understanding of the triune God? We hopefully will struggle all our days to understand these and many other questions and not give up. These are holy mysteries—not ready answers. Holy mysteries to be revealed in the heavenly realm.

A brief discussion ensued after morning Eucharist this week about the importance of doing things together as a community, especially when we don't get it, when we are not sure of the words we are saying or the underlying doctrine. We do

many things in the church that might be a challenge but we do and say them together because our fellow brothers and sisters do so also. There is power in this. One such thing we do in our Eucharistic service is to recite together the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith. In it is what we as a community hold to be our understanding of the Trinity, the relationship between God the Father, Jesus, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and the nature of each. Unified are we in the words and unified in our expressing it, but varied in our understanding and acceptance of it.

I see today as Appreciation Sunday. Appreciation in a belief system that does not require our absolute understanding and comprehension of it. Appreciation of what I understand the Trinity to be, God's working through Jesus, his only Son given to us to save the world and how through the Spirit our belief can grow. Appreciation for the scholarly work, discussion, and fierce debate that has gone into making sense out of the divine mystery. Appreciation of the use of our human words, as limited as they are in describing things like the nature of God, and finally, an appreciation of the power of doing things together, as a community of faith.

Worshipping, praying, singing, and reciting creeds that we do together, whether we agree with them or understand them totally is important. We are also called to do this whether we get along with our neighbor or not. We do all of these elements of worship together, as our Lord has asked of us, because this is the way to living out the Gospel message, and in doing so we are blessed by Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen