

# Sermon for Trinity Sunday, May 27, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

*- John 3:16*

This is the most famous verse in the Bible. As well it should be, because it sums up the heart of the Gospel - the good news of Jesus Christ. This verse sets forth as clear as day what God has done for sinners, for us, for you.

It takes us to the heart of the mystery we celebrate on Trinity Sunday. As we celebrate the revelation of the mystery of the Holy Trinity we too begin right where the ancient Church Fathers began, with the gift of the Son for our salvation. Here in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus the mystery of who God is, is made known, through what God has done for sinners.

The word, Trinity doesn't exist in the Bible. Let's get that out of the way up front. You can look for it, and you'll never find it, because it's not there. It's a Latin neologism - a new word - coined in the Third Century to try to sum up the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's used because it's a lot faster and shorter than stopping everything to explain the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just as the phrase, "the Ten Commandments" which doesn't exist in the Bible either, is faster than always reciting all ten of them, so "Trinity" is shorthand for describing the One God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yet, even as the word is, "new," the mystery behind it is old. Why in Genesis 1 does God say, *"Let us make mankind in our image?"* Who is, *"us?"* Who are, *"our?"* Why in Genesis 4 does Eve get the crazy notion that she has given birth *"to*

*a man: the Lord!"* How does Jacob wrestle with God if God is one and God is in the heavens? Why does David say in the Psalms, *"The Lord said to my Lord?"* How do we account for the, *"one like a Son of Man coming... to the Ancient of Days"* in Daniel 7? On and on it goes throughout the whole Old Testament. Here and there, and when you know to look for it, everywhere! there are intimations that something more is going on than what we might imagine from the steadfast monotheism of the Old Testament.

And the Old Testament is steadfastly monotheist. As the Shema Yisrael in Deuteronomy 6 reminds us. There God tells the children of Israel to recite the following in the evening and in the morning, when they sleep and when they rise, when they go out of their houses and into them,

*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one!"

The prophet Isaiah sees the One God in the Temple in our first lesson, and the holiness of God is so terrific that Isaiah believes this to be his undoing. The Holy God will destroy him. But instead his lips are purified to speak God's word to His people. The word Isaiah will bear them is not just the prophet's call to return the Lord, to repent and worship Him alone, it is also the promise of a servant sent by God who suffers on behalf of sinners.

That servant is Jesus, and it is Jesus who makes known to us the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It is Jesus who reveals to us that the one God of Deuteronomy, the Holy God whom Isaiah saw is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus is the servant sent by the Father, *"So must the Son of Man be lifted up,"* just like the bronze serpent in the wilderness, *"so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."*

The Son of Man who is lifted up to suffer, is Jesus says, the only Son of God, the only Son of the Father. Through this Son God's love for sinners, for us, for you, is

made known, *"For God so loved the world that gave His only Son,"* God sent the Son into the world, and Jesus is that Son.

Jesus is the Son sent by His Father's love. Sent to suffer and to die; sent to be crucified, die, buried, and rise, so that all who trust in Him may have eternal life. And Jesus says it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the faith we need to trust what God has done for us. It is the Holy Spirit who points us to Jesus and puts us to death so that we may be born again, born anew, born from above by water and the Spirit.

The early Church understood from what Jesus taught and did that He and the Spirit are God and Lord just like the Father. What they needed was words to describe what the Apostles had seen, and heard, and taught them. Words that were faithful to the monotheism of the Jewish Scriptures and to what Jesus revealed to them about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And that was a slow and painful process. The development of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is really the the story of painstakingly trying to remain faithful to this dual witness of Scripture: That God is One, and God is Three. Focus too narrowly on the Oneness of God and you end up excluding the Son and the Spirit. Focus too narrowly on the Threeness and you'll find yourself a tri-theist.

It was in the Fourth Century that the Church finally found a way to balance the two. The Fourth Century is noted for two things, the conversion of Constantine and the Arian controversy. Arius was a priest in Alexandria, Egypt, and passionate about the Oneness of God. He began preaching that the Son was not God - after all we only worship one God - but the very first creature created by God. Through this first creature God created everything else. The Son occupied a place between the Father and mankind: The one through whom all things were made, and yet a creature himself.

For a time this seemed an eloquent solution. Yet, his bishop being a faithful bishop pointed out that only God can be worshiped and the Church has always

worshiped Christ. Therefore Jesus must be God. Arius dug in his heels. The Son was not God. There was a time when He was not, said Arius. And for awhile it seemed Arius might win the day. Yet he was opposed by a deacon, later to be elected Patriarch (bishop) of Alexandria, named Athanasius. The one for whom the Athanasian Creed is named.

Athanasius began his defense of the divinity of Jesus, not with philosophy, not with abstract meditations on the Godhead or divinity. He began with Jesus and what He has done. He insisted that Jesus was both human and divine, and that this was necessary for our salvation. If Jesus is not man He cannot bear our sin as His sin. If He is not man he cannot die in our place. Adam's sin, and our sin cannot be overcome by anyone who isn't human. Just as sacrificed lambs and goats cannot bring about the forgiveness of sins, neither would some non-human creature.

Again, He said, Jesus must also be God, for only God can forgive man's sins against God. Only God has life as His very essence and being. If man enters death, man is dead. If God enters death, death will be overcome because God is life.

But Athanasius was aware of another pitfall. There's a trap in this: theologians call it modalism, i.e. there's one God who shows up in three modes. In other words the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are just masks worn by the same God. It's the old ice, water, steam illustration. The problem you see is the ice, the water, and the steam are all the same and so they can't exist at the same time. But that's not what Scripture says about God, that's certainly not what Jesus says. The Father cannot send the Son if He is the Son. The Son cannot send the Spirit if He is the Spirit. For then He would be sent and no one would be in heaven. Just as ice cannot be steam.

No, there must be a way to talk about the oneness of God, and yet preserve the threeness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It took Athanasius, and a little later

the three Cappadocian Fathers: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus to really flesh this out.

They realized that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit must have the same essence, being, substance - they are all God. They share the same essence. The Son is God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten from eternity, not made. Likewise the Holy Spirit shares the same essence, the same being as the Father and the Son.

Yet, they are three distinct "persons." Now when you and I use the term "person" we think of separate, autonomous, individuals. But that's not what the Fathers mean. What they mean is, they share the same essence, while being distinct from each other. The Father is neither the Son, nor the Holy Spirit. The Son is neither the Spirit, nor the Father. The Holy Spirit is neither the Father, nor the Son. They are three persons with one essence. The phrase the Fathers use, is they are three "hypostases" in one "ousia."

This is the mystery that the Athanasian Creed, which we Western Christians recite today is at pains to articulate: "We worship One God in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons, nor dividing the divine being. For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Spirit is still another. But the deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one... Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but they are not three gods, but one god."

This is the God whom Jesus reveals to us. The God who so loves the World that He sent His Son to become flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone; to be born, to live, to die as one with us, that we may rise as He has risen. This God who loves us, who loves sinners, who loves you, is the same God who in the beginning spoke His creating Word over the deep, and whose Spirit gave life to all living things.

This God is the Father who created all things including you and me. This God is the Son who loved you while you were yet a sinner, and loves you still though you are a sinner, and came at the Fathers bidding to die that you may have life, to win

forgiveness of sin for you. This God is the Holy Spirit who through water and the Word births you anew as the Father's child in the waters of baptism; who gives you the gift of faith to do what your heart cannot - trust God through Jesus Christ crucified that you are forgiven.

This God, this one God in three persons, is the God who makes Himself known to you in the Scriptures, in baptism, in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Above all, He wants you to know Him in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For this God so loved the world that He gave you Himself that you may have Him forever. Amen.