

Trinity (C)
Proverbs 8.1-31/Romans 5.1-11/John 16.12-15
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
3 June 2007

“DINING WITH THE TRINITY”

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today is Trinity Sunday. So I would like to begin by saying what I said last year at this time. ‘Trinity Sunday’ is an odd sort of Christian holy day, when you first think about it.

After all, we don’t celebrate a ‘Divine Love Sunday’ or a ‘Divine Justice Sunday’ in the Christian calendar. Yet perfect love and perfect justice are as true about God as is the confession that God is a ‘divine Trinity.’

The Christian claim about the Trinity was first made clearly in St. Matthew’s Gospel. It comes during Jesus’ words at the very end of the gospel. Jesus speaks about that joy we Christians have, of baptizing others into the faith, in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.¹

And we affirm weekly in the creed that the divine Trinity has always been, long before there were Christians. And we must honestly acknowledge that it took a few centuries for our spiritual ancestors to express the details of the divine Trinity—at least in terms that they could all finally agree upon, and that we still confess today.² So, what can we say after all that, but repeat the Scriptures and say the Creed?

Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers (in France) wrote his book *De Trinitate* in France about the year 360 a.d., and concluded after 500 pages of contemplation: ‘I cannot describe [the One] whose words to me are beyond my power of description.’³ Augustine, bishop of Hippo (in North Africa), wrote his own 500 page *De Trinitate*, and said something similar fifty years later. ‘Deliver me, O God, from the multitude of words with which I am inwardly inflicted in my soul.’⁴ And our own Archbishop of Canterbury (in England), Rowan

¹ *Matthew 28.19*

² The final shape of the Nicene creed was arrived at in the fifth century. And there is still a small disagreement between Eastern and Western churches. The Western churches later added the *philioque*—that is the at the Holy Spirit ‘proceeded from the Father *and the Son*.’ This is seen in the difference between the Creed confessed in the *Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p.71-72, and the older version of the Creed without the *philioque*, still used in the East, as recovered by the *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: ABC, 1985), p.188-189.

³ *The Trinity*. Trans. S. McKenna. (Washington: CUPA, 1954), p. 542.

⁴ *The Trinity*. Trans. S. McKenna. (Washington: CUPA, 1963), p.524.

Williams, a much-appreciated theologian, has struggled to express in words his encounter with the truth of the Holy Trinity.⁵

And yet Hilary and Augustine and Rowan, and many others have had much to say about the Trinity—not just about its mystery, or its beauty, but about its reality. If we could not understand God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we would not be confessing the whole faith. Our faith would be impoverished, it would be quite incomplete. So today I would like us to think about the one, central Trinitarian idea.

To confess that God is a Trinity, is quite different than talking about God's perfect love, or perfect justice, or another 'quality' or 'attribute' of the God we worship this morning.

To confess that God is a Trinity is to say that Christians believe something about the deepest character of God. We confess that our God cannot really be described as a distant, solitary deity, like the Allah of our Muslim friends and neighbours.

We see this in the confessions made by today's Gospel: First, the Holy Spirit speaks, but not on its own nor for itself alone. Second, what is the Father's possession is the Son's possession too. Third the Father will glorify Jesus, the Son.

That is not all there is to say, of course. We overhear another snatch of the great Trinitarian truth in today's Epistle: We have peace with God the Father through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who has reconciled us to God, whom we rejected. And this reconciliation is all wrapped up in the love of God the Father 'poured into our hearts', says St. Paul, 'through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'

And there is much more said in the Scriptures. And here we come closer to the central truth about the Trinity we confess.

To confess that God is a Trinity is for Christians to say this: Out of the fellowship and variety within the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) the universe in all its variety was brought forth—male and female, flora and fauna, colours and textures, mountain and sea. And we confess that through the communion of the persons of the Godhead this universe is being redeemed in all its splendid variety and diversity.

After all, last Sunday, Pentecost, we did not celebrate the reduction of humanity's many tongues to one language. We did celebrate one wonderful message of Christ's redemption for the world. But we celebrate

⁵ See *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p.129-180.

what was celebrated by the crowds in Jerusalem: ‘How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’

‘Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Meopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’⁶

Here is the central idea: On Trinity Sunday we are invited to celebrate the very character of the Trinitarian God in whose image we are made. In other words, we rejoice together that the creation and redemption of humanity is wrapped up in the deep and rich fellowship of the divine Trinity. We were created in a deep and rich variety to share fellowship with each other and with our God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Eastern (that is the Orthodox) Church has long emphasized the fellowship within the Trinity. And it has long considered art as one of the best ways of talking about God. Holy pictures (icons) from the Christian East (including Russian ones) are not quite the same as European religious paintings. Eastern icons are like theological poems, conveying deep truths about God and humanity. It is said that icons are ‘written’ not ‘painted’. In other words, icons can be heretical or they can be faithful to the truth about God.

And for that reason I would like us to look at a well-loved Orthodox icon by great Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev (c. 1370-1427).⁷ Icons, in the Orthodox church, can portray Jesus Christ, and they often do, because Christ (as it was put in the *Gospel according to St. John*) ‘became flesh and lived among us.’⁸

But icons cannot portray the invisible God—that would be considered idolatry. So this icon, on the screen, is an icon of Abraham’s three angelic visitors—do you remember the story? The three come to Sarah and Abraham to announce the coming birth of their long-awaited child.⁹ And the three Angelic visitors, it is clearly understood, are themselves a ‘type’ or expression of the three persons of the Trinitarian Godhead confessed by Christians.

What is important in this particular icon is not really ‘who is who’—that is, who is the Father, who the Son, and who the Holy Spirit—and ‘who does

⁶ *The Acts of the Apostles* 2.8-11. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless stated otherwise.

⁷ You can view and image of the icon at <<http://www.valley.net/~transnat/trinlg.html>>

⁸ *John* 1.14.

⁹ *Genesis* 18.1-16.

what! Instead the importance lies in the fellowship of the three around the table. This is the central idea, the central truth of the Trinity.

You can see that the three do share the table, and the table does have food on it. The icon is all about divine fellowship, of course, but also about our fellowship with the triune God.

But unlike the story of Abraham who prepared the meal and gave it to his three guests, and then watched them eat, this icon makes a Trinitarian confession. The three become the host of the meal and make a unified offer to share in the food and fellowship of the Trinity—an offer to Abraham and all his spiritual descendants, an offer to join the Godhead on the fourth side of the table.

This is at one and the same time three very real invitations. First it is an invitation, through the Eucharist, to enter into fellowship with God. Second, and at the same time, it is an invitation to live as a church in the same kind of fellowship. Third it is an invitation to invite other into fellowship with God and with us.

Do you recall the ending to the Pentecost chapter in the book of *Acts*, whose beginning we read last Sunday? After everyone understood the one message of Jesus Christ in their own language, they began to share life together. As the community grew, they shared what they had. So, we have these verses, among others: ‘Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people.’¹⁰

Today we are about to welcome four people, four ‘images of God’ into the Christian church, to share in the same gift of Christ’s redemption which we enjoy, through what we call the ‘sacrament of baptism.’ What are we inviting them, and their families, into?

Immediately after we confess with them our belief in God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—we make promises (a covenant), together with them, as a whole community.

The promises of the covenant begin this way:

Celebrant: Will you continue in the Apostles’ teaching, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

People: **We will, with God’s help.**

¹⁰ *Acts* 2.46-47.

It is here that we make a communal covenant to meet together around the Lord's Table as often as we can, and enter into fellowship with the holy Trinity and with each other.

It is here that we affirm our mission to declare the good news of Christ's salvation to the world.

It is here we invite the world, through baptism, to share with us in the Eucharist at our Lord's Table.

And it is when we hear these words that we remember that we are meant to invite all who need it, to share the food that we have on the tables in our homes, and on the tables at the back of this church, and on the tables in our Parish House, and on the other tables that we prepare.

We pray that God will help us keep our promises this morning with the newly baptized, and help us know the joy, even today, of fellowship with these new participants in our community.

In the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.