

Trinity Sunday (A)
Genesis 1.1-2.4a/I Corinthians 13.11-13/Matthew 28.16-20
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
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Trinity, Humanity and the Church

~Paul H. Friesen~

I've had an experience recently, which many of you might have had. I have seen words put together that didn't make sense or turned out to mean something quite different than what was first intended.

I often pass by a certain Community Centre on the way home. Recently they've posted a list of general interest programmes for the public. Because of the shape of the sign they've had to list the programmes in two columns—but whoever posted them neglected to leave space between the two columns, leading to some comical results.

At least that's what I thought when I glanced at the new sign the first time and read across the two columns, about half way down, and immediately saw one phrase as I read from left to right: 'Belly Dance' 'Dog Walking'. The images which came to mind were, well, confusing—and not what was intended, I'm sure!

This is often a problem with religious language—for a different reason. We often try to put into words something that is almost beyond words. And that is our predicament today, Trinity Sunday. Whatever could be meant by 'Holy Trinity' or 'God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit'? Have we been stuck repeating words that we should toss out and replace? Or should we keep repeating them, but with more understanding?

In fact, Christians have been using 'Trinitarian' language from the beginning. As we heard in both the Gospel and Epistle reading today, the earliest Christians found it impossible to talk about their faith without talking about those we call the 'three persons' of the Holy Trinity. They did this when they baptized someone into the church, and they did it when they greeted each other, or when they said farewell.

We have sung this morning about the different roles of the person of the Holy Trinity. And we have read just in one passage of the Scriptures, for instance, that sometimes God the Father is associated with love, Jesus Christ his son with grace, and the Holy Spirit with 'fellowship.'

We could talk more about this, and we could talk about the mystery of how the three persons of the Trinity are really one God. And this shouldn't be

avoided—there's a lot of good in discussing this with the benefit of our ancestors' thoughts.

But this morning I would like to stand back a bit, and look at the whole idea of the Trinity: why is it so important that we take notice of this in the Scriptures, and confess this in the creed, and used it in worship?

There are two reasons to talk about God as a Trinity, and not only because our ancestors thought this was important. *First*, the human race is made in God's image, so to talk about the Trinity is somehow to talk about ourselves. *Second*, the most important thing we can discover about the Trinity is what we call their shared communion, or communality; their shared covenant of the deepest kind of love.

First, the human race is made in God's image, so to talk about the Trinity is somehow to talk about ourselves—to know God and ourselves at the same time.

God is our maker—this through runs deep in human history. If it is a delusion, it's always been with us. I don't know if you've heard about the archaeological dig near a place called Gobekli Tepe, near the present-day border between Turkey and Syria. I've just read about in the *Guardian Weekly*, as it's story is being picked up by the media, though the dig has been going on for a decade.¹

It's caused a bit of chaos in the world of professional archeologists because the circle of stone carvings is firmly dated back to 9,500 BC—before cities or even agriculture had emerged, 5,500 years before the cities of Mesopotamia, like Ur, which Abraham fled and 7,000 years older than the circle at Stonehenge. It is a religious site erected by a village of hunters, it seems.

But what caught my attention was the nature of the carvings. Distinguished from the carvings of foxes and lions and birds and snakes are T-shaped columns with semi-human carvings.

Klaus Schmidt, the archaeologist who discovered it, says: 'I think here we are face to face with the earliest representation of the gods...They have no eyes, no mouths, no faces. But they have arms and they have hands. They are makers.'

We confess, above all, that God is our maker. So to know God is to know ourselves. We have heard the first of the two famous biblical creation stories this morning. The creation of the humanity is only one part of it, of course. But it is a critical part.

¹ Nicholas Birch, 'Civilization before agriculture,' *Guardian Weekly* (09.05.08), p. 30.

We were made, we hear, to be like God in two ways: to be fruitful (that is creative), and in some sense to govern. Human history at times seems to show that we have erred by turning the governing or leading of the rest of creation to domination and exploitation—and turning creativity into destruction. We need to recover creativity and governance as first meant.

But there's something else about God: what is this 'Let *us* make' business. Weren't the ancient Hebrews 'monotheists'? Didn't they worship *one* God? Isn't this what distinguished them from their neighbours who they accused of inventing gods for all occasions?

Jewish Rabbis and Christian Scholars have talked about this a lot—for its important to both Jews and Christians who share the same book of *Genesis*. Is the 'us' like the 'royal we' the 'plural of majesty' used by queens and kings and bishops—'We are not amused,' Queen Victoria was supposed to have said. But if so, says Rabbi Friedman, the 'royal we' is used only here in the Hebrew Scriptures.² Or ask others, is this language used as if God were talking to himself, thinking aloud?

A Christian scholar put it well for Christians. He calls the 'Let *us* make...' the 'plural of fullness'—long before Christians talked about the 'Trinity'.³ We get a hint in the first sentences of *Genesis* in which God's 'wind' or 'spirit' (same word in Hebrew) hovers over the watery chaos out of which God creates. In other words, God is not the last action hero, the lonesome cowboy avenger.

God is one, most certainly, but God has within God's self all the variety and diversity we see in creation. God is like us, and we are like God, but only if we see ourselves as a human race, not detached individuals. God created *humanity* in the divine image, and that is where we should always begin.

And that is clear in the story. "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness"...So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'

The first sign of the plurality of God is that the human race has the variety called male and female. Men or women might call God 'he' and do call God 'Father'. We need metaphors.

But as Christians we need to understand that just as the image of God is seen in male and female together, so God must be seen not only as Father, but as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as today's Gospel and Epistle remind us. Father and Son are male metaphors, but the Holy Spirit in our

² Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), p.12.

³ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p.133-4.

scriptures is 'neuter'. God is more than any one of us. God's image is written in the human race. God is much more than us, but we issued from God, the maker of all that is.

God created, we confess—but not how. That is for us to explore through science. But for all Christians it is critical to know that there is variety in the godhead, the Trinity we call it—not just between male and female. God created us as a human race with all its depth and breadth. *The human race is made in God's image, so to talk about the Trinity is somehow to talk about ourselves.*

But there's something else to talk about.

The most important thing we can discover about the Trinity is what we call their shared communion, or communality; their shared covenant of the deepest kind of love.

If we read the words of Jesus in the New Testament we can understand, a bit, how important this is.

On the eve of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, it seemed he wanted to talk about nothing else but the shared communion or fellowship he had with the Father and the Holy Spirit. 'All mine are yours and yours are mine,' Jesus prays to God the Father about his disciples in St. John's Gospel. And Jesus also said, 'The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.'⁴

This shared unity of the Trinity is meant to be shared by us the church, a community created anew in the divine image.

This Jesus also says in St. John's Gospel, as he prays to his Father: 'The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they might be completely one.'⁵

It couldn't be much clearer. We were created in the divine image of the Triune God; for Christians to live in a way that our variety is a variety with shared communion—appreciating distinctions but always, always communing, having fellowship that brings our differences into a shared life, a shared mission. This isn't all about conformity, but the give and take and mutual appreciation of the differences in a truly unified Church community, gathered to worship the Trinity in whose image it has been made.

And this is why it is so important to greet each other in the name of the Trinity and say farewell in the name of the Trinity, and in the exchanges

⁴ John 17.10; 14.26. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁵ John 17.22.

we have in worship, in the liturgy. It's a bit of poetry to help us remember, and live life in the image of the divine Trinity.

There is a big difference, on the one hand, between a bunch of individuals worshipping in one place at the same time, each wanting the community and its worship and life to conform to his or her individual desires...And, on the other hand, a diverse community, that knows all its diverse members need each other to be a true community, reflecting God's image to the world, so that others can join us.

That is why Matthew's Gospel ends in what might seem a curious, even strange way, with unusual words of Jesus. 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Shared communion is the mark of the Christian community—as also, of course, is its shared relationship to God. For the very last words of Matthew's Gospel are these. 'And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

It is in the shared human communion of the church—the 'body of Christ' we are called, that we are truly able to enter into fellowship with the Trinity—not as individual spiritual giants rising above the coldness or our fellow worshippers.

And so, we commune together with each other, and together with God at the Lord's Table as the most important single act of our church life.

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