

Trinity Sunday, Year A  
June 11, 2017  
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It is unfair to claim, as many have, including myself when I am being too clever, that no one truly understands the doctrine of the Trinity. There are plenty of people who understand it now, just as there were plenty of people who understood it in ages past. It is also true that there were, and are today, many more who don't understand it at all, some of whom believe they do. Part of the reason for this is that the doctrine is complicated even given the best of circumstances, as witnessed by the huge variety of ways of talking about the Trinity that were ultimately deemed insufficient by the theologians who ultimately prevailed, and part of the reason is that we don't use terms like "person," "substance" and "being" in quite the way they did in the fourth century when the more or less final version of the doctrine was reached. Finally, another reason is that people don't care as much anymore; today it is enough to call the doctrine of the Trinity a "mystery" and leave the arguing about that mystery to those who do this for a living.

There is something good about that. At the very least it means we are concentrating more on witness and faith than we are on the finer points of doctrine. Nevertheless I also believe that since this doctrine is central to the whole Christian witness, it is important to struggle with it periodically, and not

simply for the exercise, but because I am convinced that although understanding and believing in the doctrine of the Trinity is not what makes us good Christians, and certainly not what makes us good people, I believe the doctrine as it developed over the centuries more accurately describes the human perception of the relationship between God and creation than anything else we have seen thus far. Here is why I believe this.

Every moment of our lives we are confronted with a great mystery, existence itself and our place in it. I use the term mystery not in the sense of a problem that has not been solved because of a lack of information, but in the sense of that which cannot be understood no matter how much information we have. The mechanical model of the universe which became popular after Copernicus, Newton and LaPlace has collapsed in the last hundred years; the belief that we could resolve inconsistencies with better measurements and fewer errors has itself contributed to that collapse, for the more precise our ability to measure things, the greater the errors and inconsistencies we have discovered. Mechanical models have given way to statistical models, so that now what scientists talk about is a range of probabilities, rather than exact measurements. Randomness, which in scientific circles means “unpredictability” is now the overwhelmingly accepted model of the universe. Yet, no one believes we have arrived at “the truth.” The statistical model has displaced the mechanical model, but it is simply a model which fits more facts than the older one; eventually a

new model will emerge that fits even more facts, but it too will be provisional, and the universe will remain a mystery to us forever.

In the very center, or heart – both terms are metaphors – of the mystery which is physical existence, is God. God is not a name that describes anything. The word “God” is a place holder, a term used to denote the utterly and completely transcendent power over reality to which we have no direct access whatsoever because it is beyond all possible comprehension. We can deal only with the finite, the limited, that which is confined to space and time, and since what we call God is beyond space and time, there is no direct access from us to God. That is the reason, most simply put, that in recent times some people have decided that this transcendent power must not be real. We can’t get to it, and it isn’t accessible by any experimental procedures that would confirm its reality, so we eliminate it from our considerations.

Even though we can’t get to God, in the sense I am using the term now, God gets to us. First, God gets to us by implanting in the human heart – another metaphor – a sense of the reality of God, a belief, a conviction, even a certainty, that we are not alone, and have indeed been noticed and embraced by whatever this mystery at the center of all reality is. The story of Moses at the burning bush is among the most remarkable ways humans have devised to speak of this revelation, and there are countless others.

Among them is the story of Jesus. After his death many of his followers, but not all I am sure, became convinced that in him they had been face to face

with the very presence of the same God they worshipped as Jews, the God who had led them at every step of their history. None of them believed Jesus was God, such a notion would have been rightly labelled idolatry, and the Catholic tradition, following that instinct, has never claimed Jesus was God, though many Christians do say that. They knew that God can't be localized that way, can't be limited that way, can't be confined that way, and so they declared that in this fully and completely human person, Jesus, the fullness of whatever God is, was revealed. Colossians has nice phrase: "In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." John says The Word, which was God and was in God, "became flesh." And yet, in John's gospel Jesus is ceaselessly talking to God. Unless we want to imagine Jesus talking to himself, we must believe John was clarifying his famous phrase. God - who is remote beyond all remoteness - comes to us in and through Jesus. God is at once far away and fully immersed in our humanity, both at the same time. How can that be? Four centuries after this experience the Church lit upon both the notion of Trinity and the notion of the dual nature of Christ, both fully human and fully divine.

But there was more, for whatever Jesus had been before his death he continued to be afterwards, and under his spell the community that had been shattered by his death became a coherent and assertive community of faith spreading the good news that even those who crucified him were loved, and accepted. Something was sustaining that community, and that something wasn't Jesus, since Jesus was gone. The community came to understand that God was

sustaining them, the very God who was still beyond all understanding, still remote beyond all remoteness, who had been present in Jesus was present and continued to be with them.

The best, most durable and most accurate way to talk about this was by the notion of Trinity as it developed over most of four centuries. Denying the humanity of Jesus was simply untrue, for he was fully and completely human. Denying the fullness of the divinity that dwelt in him was equally untrue, since the community founded in his name explained their own experience in part by reference to living in the presence of the Divine. Similarly, the community that grew from those first followers had this sense of still being in the presence of God. It wasn't just a memorial society, their meals were not like Civil War reenactments, but rather they were moments of living in the presence of Christ.

The doctrine of the Trinity arose from reflections on the experience of the first followers of Jesus, the members of the second generation community, and the experience of subsequent generations right to this moment. They weren't describing God, who remained ever and always Mystery, they were reflecting on their continuing existence as a community of faith. They knew God was One, ever and always remote, incomprehensible and indivisible. They knew this God had come to them in Jesus, and they knew they were still supported by that same presence. What they came to was that God worked through Christ in the Spirit. Or, if you like, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Christians are not the only people who talk like this. For Jews God is ever and always one, but God's presence is mediated by the Torah, and God's spirit guides the community even now. That is Trinitarian thought. For Islam it is the same. There is Allah, ever and always one, there is the Koran by which Allah's will and presence is mediated, and there is the community of Muslims sustained by and obedient to Allah. That is a Trinitarian formulation. It just is.

On that note, I will end with this. The convergence of this pattern of thinking across three great religions suggests something; We are not Trinitarians because God is, God is perceived as Trinity because that is how human beings put together their lived experience of the mystery which is God. God isn't "Trinity." God is beyond all thought and conceptuality, as the entire Bible makes clear throughout. We organize our experience of this Mystery in Trinitarian terms because in the end that is what makes the most sense of that experience. That is why I am ever and always a Trinitarian. It is why I so like the Nicene Creed. It does not tell us how God is constituted; it describes for posterity the best, most durable, and most ecumenical way of talking about the human experience of the divine, regardless of which religion a person practices.