



1st Pentecost B
Trinity Sunday
Church of the Advent
May 27, 2018

The Gift of Trinity Sunday

First off, I will let you in on a little secret: clergy generally do not like to preach on Trinity Sunday. Whenever I was serving as an assistant or associate priest—meaning *not* in charge—the rector would invariably be off, leaving me to preach on the Trinity—perhaps because it usually coincides with the beginning of Summer vacation, but more likely because it is hard to make credible sense of one of the central concepts in our Anglican Christian theology, the Holy Trinity. So here I am with no one but Stephen to pawn it off on (and that just seemed too mean) to preach about the Triune God—Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, traditionally known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yet, lest you think I am going to start a brain-twisting theology lesson about what the Church believes the Holy Trinity to mean, think again; you can find that in the Book of Common Prayer on page 845, broken down in questions and answers like a catechism. And I am not going to offer the traditional historical listing of all the heresies the Church fought over through the ages by way of explaining what the Trinity is NOT. What I want to share with you today is more like a gift. Blown in on the winds of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday is like a last exhale before we begin long season of Ordinary Time—an afterthought left on our doorstep that turns out to be a treasure. The gift is this—that getting the Holy Trinity is not about comprehending who or what God *is*, or what job each person of the Trinity *does*, but rather witnessing the mystery about how God *relates*—that is, how God loves and cares for all of Creation—and for us.

Our readings help us to open our gift today; each one offers a different approach to thinking about how God relates. First we have a vision from Isaiah the Prophet. Isaiah's describes the Lord on a throne, surrounded by singing angels with wings enough to cover their faces and their feet while they fly through smoke, shake the house and drop hot coals on his mouth. It sounds like Isaiah had been hitting the sauce, but then sometimes you just can't make that stuff up. The most convincing evidence that Isaiah was describing a powerful personal experience of God—beyond his beautiful poetry that we still sing every Eucharist—was his willingness to respond—without knowing what he was signing up for—*here am I Lord, send me!* Isaiah's vision of the Lord God gives God the glory, as does the psalm we sang this morning, where the voice of God is called powerful, thundering, shaking the trees bare and riding upon the mighty waters. God is available. God is engaged.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul offers his own take on the nature of God—that it is the Spirit of God who teaches us about our identity as children of God adopted by *Abba*, our Father. This same Spirit—the Lord and Giver of Life—moves within us, showing us how to stand before the Lord God, unafraid. Paul wants us to *see* ourselves as beloved children of God, experiencing the love and protection of God—just as a beloved child receives from a loving parent.

And then we have the gospel story of Jesus and Nicodemus. An important Jewish leader, Nicodemus came to Jesus during the night—probably to avoid the criticism of his peers for talking to Jesus—who had been challenging the Jewish authorities’ hypocrisy in using purity rules more for exclusion than inclusion into community. Nicodemus seemed to be sincere in trying to find out more about Jesus—not to destroy him, but to understand where he came from, and why he was turning everything he knew upside down and inside out. And what did Nicodemus find out? That he needed to be *born again*. Nicodemus came to ask a serious question and was answered with a riddle. Why would Jesus use the imagery of birth to teach Nicodemus about the nature of God? Because it is a universal experience—it applies to *everyone*, no exceptions. Since Adam and Eve were created from the earth in the Garden of Eden, all of humanity has come into existence by being born of a woman, including Jesus. This complex physiological miracle is not something anyone had to *learn* how to do. Babies have been born every day since the beginning of humanity long before birth was medicalized and specialized. When a baby is ready to enter the world, it somehow knows what to do and the body of the mother is taken over by forces she cannot control. Not without pain and difficulty, every new tiny person emerges helpless, yet able to touch some tender place in those who will love and care for them—unconditionally—for there is nothing a newborn can offer in exchange for that love and care. Just as each vulnerable infant counts on a parent’s love, each vulnerable person *born again in the Spirit* can count on the unconditional love of God.

So how do these scriptural gifts of understanding God help us to see how God relates in Trinity, and relates to us? God as Lord of Lords upon a throne surrounded by angels, looking for someone to send into the world; God as Spirit of adoption, calling us children; God as birthing us again, ready to love us in our helplessness, our dependency, and our hope for new life that is as radical as Easter, as mysterious as Pentecost?

One place to experience the identity, meaning and relationship in the Holy Trinity is through Celtic Spirituality. Expressing values of harmony, unity and interdependence, God in Trinity—as introduced to the Celts in Ireland by St. Patrick with a 3 leaf clover in the 4th Century—is God in unity—three persons bound together in lush green proliferative love. An appreciation of the wholeness and unity of God in Trinity came easily to the Celts, whose pre-Christian culture prioritized relationship—family and close community. For those long ago ancestors to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ that was born out of the love and unity of God in Trinity just made sense. A God who is relational—and who by Spirit infuses every aspect of Creation with love and care—expressed values that they already held: the beauty, bounty, and blessing of the Earth, the connected cycles of birth and death, the sacredness of life in community. These values are harder to recognize in our present day world; they compete with the individualism, competition and the partisanship that can slowly steal our souls, and threaten to tear at the fabric of the human family a little more with every passing day.

Our salvation from being lost to this world comes not just from one saving act of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, but from the abundant love that spills over into us from the Holy Trinity—Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. How God relates within the Trinity—with love and grace—is how God relates to us, and how we are meant to relate to one another. The many visions and images of God offered from scripture, or from our own experience, may seem to complicate our understanding of God, yet—like all good gifts—they are usually just the right thing given and received at just the right time. The overall message is that the love of God is

mysterious and powerful, and the only way the whole human family can find redemption beyond our oppositional, bitter, rancorous, despairing failure to love our another as well as we love ourselves, is to accept the generous gift of God's love in all of its manifestations.

A 17th Welsh writer said, *the Trinity abides with us as...the ore in the earth, the child in the womb, the fire in a stove, the sea in a well.*¹ How could our lives be different if we took our relationship with the Holy Trinity as seriously as the ancient people who carried this Irish Blessing prayer on their breath as they moved through their day?

I lay me down with Thee, O Jesus
And mayest Thou be about my bed,
The oil of Christ be upon my soul,
The Apostles' Creed be above my head,
O Father who wrought me,
O Son who bought me,
O Spirit who sought me,
Let me be Thine.

John O'Donohue wrote that *love is the threshold where divine and human presence ebb and flow into each other.*² How could opening our gift this Trinity Sunday, and finding its abundant promise of a deeper experience the Triune God—wrapped in love—change our lives? Or as our now internationally famous Presiding Bishop Michael Curry might say, how then could we help but to love, and to change the world? On this Trinity Sunday, as we carry the hope and promises of the Resurrection forward into Ordinary Time, let it be so. Amen

¹ De Wall, E., *The Celtic Way of Prayer* Doubleday 1997 p.40

² O'Donohue, J. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* 1998 p. 15