

Since the 10th Century Christ's Church has observed, in one form or another, "Holy Trinity Sunday" this first Sunday after Pentecost. (You all know by now that mere longevity does not necessarily mean something is correct or accurate or good. A lot of dumb ideas have been floating around for a lot longer than a thousand years. And many of you also know that talk of the Holy Trinity is always apt to be complex... but this is not a good reason to avoid the subject—but rather to be faithful and clear in approaching it.)

There's plenty to be gained from our studying the wider Church's understanding of the nature of God, God as trinity. (You know: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.) In our tradition and practice, none of you is required to believe what I teach, and we all answer to One much higher than *moi*. If the understanding of God as one-in-three, three-in-one is helpful to you, terrific. (By helpful I mean helpful in freeing you to pray; to heed the guidance of the living God; to live your life in glad service to God as one who belongs fully to God—as one who is delighted to worship and obey Him above all else.) If some other understanding is more helpful in getting you to where God wants you to be, and accords with what God has revealed of Himself in Jesus and calls to mind in you thru His Holy Spirit, then by all means be my guest... But I want for us to be clear what the Church has generally believed, and why. Saints of God, women and men faithful and intelligent and obedient, have lived in all times and places.

About this time last year, June of 2006, you might recall the doctrine of the Holy Trinity got a lot of press. The Presbyterians (PCUSA) were gathered in their General Assembly and they received a document asking local churches to study and apply their findings—new, relevant, 21st Century ways of speaking of the Trinity of God, to be used in local worship. What do you think: "Speaker, Word, and Breath." "Rainbow, Ark, and Dove." "Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-Giving Womb." "Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides, and Storm that Melts Mountains." As one frustrated participant suggested, "Hewey, Dewey, and Louie."

I happen to believe that for the most part these formulations lose "in translation" a lot more than they gain, compared with the language the Scriptures themselves have given us: God as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." (We know God is not male, other than the human form in which the Christ, the 2nd person of the Trinity (if you will) came to us. [More on this next Sunday.]) However their proponents are continuing to do exactly what the earliest Church was trying to do: to make clear, or at least workable, a mystery and reality far greater than our ability to comprehend it. (Be nervous when anyone, Trinitarian or other, tries to reduce an infinite God down into a formula or creed or image we can fully comprehend. If we can understand it, it is not God!)

The Bible never teaches explicitly that God exists in the form of a trinity. So the earliest Church faced a dilemma, which is the same dilemma the Presbyterians and faithful Christians today are trying to face and to resolve. How best to interpret the observed reality about God—the data of Scripture, the best memories of those who knew Jesus most closely, the ongoing experience of those who continue to know and follow Jesus, the findings of science and the insights of other religions and other modes of knowing?

[If you know you belong to God and care about your faith, you are a theologian. If you worship God with all your mind and heart, you care very much about how careful a theologian you are. You are responsible for what you choose to believe, and for acting upon and living out your beliefs. But did you know that the best theologians, back in the first few centuries after Jesus lived and even today, behave a lot like the best scientists? Our best Christian theology is an ongoing attempt to make the best sense of the data of the world. No less than in chemistry or biology—we keep learning, keep trying out more simple, more elegant, more accurate ways to explain the observed realities.

Some would dismiss the Church's conviction that God is best (though never comprehensively) understood as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as artificial or overly complicated or counter-intuitive. At this point, on the contrary, I believe this understanding of God reflects the careful and prayerful reflections of many generations of Christians. After all, as Sir John Polkinghorne (Chair of Queens College, Cambridge University; resigned his chair in Physics, the one occupied by Sir Isaac Newton, to study to become an Anglican priest, winner of the 2002 Templeton Award) has observed, there's nothing about the theory of general relativity which is so intuitively obvious or self-evident. For centuries Newton's theory of physics proved most accurate, but science has now also validated theories of sub-atomic physics and general relativity and such—because the new realities observed require novel ways of thinking. New ways of thinking are not necessarily idle or fanciful speculation.]

The first followers of Jesus were compelled by their experience into new ways of thought. Of course they were almost all Jewish, and they were monotheists to the core—sometimes to the death. Many of their ancestors had willingly gone to martyrdom before bending the knee to false gods—from the golden calf to Baal to Molech to Caesar. Remember Elijah? “Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one...” [the Shema; Dt 6:1] At their most faithful, they would do anything before they would worship a false god, or more than the one God. Some extremely powerful new data caused them freely, gladly, to begin to worship Jesus.

The first followers of Jesus faced a dilemma of a different kind as they tried to understand and explain to others what they had witnessed. The dilemma is still there: how do you communicate a new truth, or a new worldview, or a higher dimension, to people existing on a lower dimension, who understand the world thru their old truths which will not allow for what is True? How do you convince someone about the rings of Saturn to someone who won't believe you and won't look into a telescope?

Let's go back 2000 years. Ready for some philosophy? The Romans were in control politically, but the worldview of the educated people was the Greek, [Neo-] Platonist one. Everybody knew that the one god, a “monad” [Greek for what in English, via French and Latin, might be called a “unit” or “unity”—the root means “one”: as in “monosyllabic,” “monotheistic,” “monolithic” etc] existed on the higher, spiritual plane. They believed this material world of people and animals was impure; the one god could not get his hands dirty, as it were, by any real involvement in this earthly dimension. Any true god must necessarily exist outside of and beyond time, because time implies change which implies imperfection. Any true god must only exist out beyond physical space, since space is the realm of our five senses, which can never reveal for us absolute truth which is beyond this physical realm. Every serious thinker just knew all this.

[This worldview was also then left with some unresolvable dichotomies: one was between the “sensible” world, knowable thru the five senses, and the “intelligible” world—knowable only thru the rational and spiritual powers of the mind. Another was between the role of “virture” as contrasted against “fortune” or “fate.” The world of phenomenon, things that happen, was clearly not subject to rationality—so the real world had to be under the control of either irrationality or blind, harsh fate. People saw themselves ultimately as helpless victims under the greater uncontrolled powers of the universe.

This worldview left plenty of room for intermediate entities partway between the unknowable, divine realm of spirit and this earthly world of events and accidents. So Jesus, or any human, may have been seen as an “emanation” or a representative of the one god, or maybe somehow a fraction of a god, or maybe a human being who was especially close to the one god—but not in any way truly God.]

For especially the first three centuries, the Church spent a lot of time and energy—and prayer, and reflection, and correspondence, and discussions, and debate, and the occasional sword, trying to forge out what it believed about who Jesus was and who God was.

(If you are interested in such controversies, the early Church history is fascinating. You can sure be that every consensual understanding, later called “orthodoxy,” had to be argued and defined over against some contrary understanding. There was Marcion who believed the Old Testament God was one wrathful deity while the New Testament God was a better-tempered but entirely separate deity. The Adoptionists believed Jesus became somehow divine at a point in His human life, but He was born with the same nature as every other human. The Subordinationists believed Jesus was more special than other humans, but of a lesser essence than God. The Modalists believed there were not three distinct Persons within the nature of God but rather one God who acted in three distinct roles. Then there were the Sabellianists, the Apollonarians, the Manichaeans, the Nestorians and others.)

But what all these deliberations had in common was that they all took place within the philosophical framework the Church, within the Roman Empire, had inherited from the Greeks. The reason the Church kept persevering, kept refining their belief, their confession, was that the classical Greek system of thought in the end left the dichotomies, the tensions of the world intact. Also, and more important, I believe these Greek ways of thinking left the world with a God too uninvolved and too remote from human history. Not the true God. Their worldview was too small for the data of their experience of Jesus in the world.

The Church had always held in the heart of its belief and worship the Son of God who had died on the cross and been raised from the dead: “The Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me,” as Paul wrote (Galatians 2:20.) There is a preserved bit of graffiti etched in one of the Roman catacombs from this era: there’s a picture of the head of a donkey stretched out on a cross, and the insult below it “Anexamanos worships his god.” Perhaps a pagan slave mocking a Christian slave. A donkey on a cross.

The idea of Jesus being somehow God provoked great ire and contempt in that environment, but the point worth preserving is that somehow in Jesus the One God of the universe had actually come to live among us and had chosen to die on the cross to show

all human beings the quality and depth of God's love. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself." [2 Cor 5:17]

[If this outlandish confession was true, it turned upside down the classical view of reality. This truth: that God has entered into this human dimension in Christ—that Jesus was in some real way God incognito living among us people—finally resolved the dichotomies inherent in Platonic thought. (Apart from the Holy Spirit, no one then or now can understand this resolution, because apart from the Holy Spirit we only understand the world in the self-evident, self-verifying terms we are taught. No one can verify the truth of the higher dimension from the evident data of the lower dimension.)

But the truth of God having become flesh in Jesus the Son does resolve these dilemmas of human meaning and existence which even the wisest Greek and Roman philosophers could not answer. Reality is one; "intelligible" and "sensible" realms are united. "Virtue" and "fate" are resolved. God Himself has entered into history and has suffered; suffering is no longer necessarily in vain, and human beings are no longer the mere playthings of stronger capricious forces beyond our control. We follow Jesus along His Way, even to the cross. We obey the Father as Jesus Christ the Son did; our struggles in this lifetime are not in vain because "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose." Even our death is not a defeat; God the Father raised God the Son from the dead, so that He was "the firstborn of many brothers and sisters." Even death is redeemed into eternal life.

The point is that all that theological wrangling early on, and ever since, was not idle speculation. The Church kept worshiping Jesus; they kept asking the tough questions and following where the Truth led them—and they ended up shattering wide open the "too small" views of reality which caused millions of people in that classical Mediterranean world to be needlessly shackled and fearful. The Church eventually confessed that the God over the universe is for us, not against us; God is knowable and approachable; God wants to know us and does know us; God has entered into our brokenness and pain so that they, and we, might be redeemed. [These insights about come from Lesslie Newbigin's *Open Secret*, Eerdmans, 1978, pp 26-29]

In the New Testament, who is God? The early Church told and retold the "Greatest Story Ever Told"—they told the story of Jesus. Matthew called Him "God among us," "Emmanuel." John called Him the "Logos," the "Word" or "Message" communicated directly and accurately from God. Jesus reveals God to us human beings. "What the Word was, God was." John and Paul both tell us that God the Son, the second Person, had always existed. They did not confuse Jesus or the Holy Spirit for God; of course Jesus knew He was not praying to Himself—He was praying to His Father. God did not die on the cross; Mary was not the mother of God. She gave birth to the Son of God as He took human flesh in Bethlehem for those 30 years or so here in this dimension. (The New Testament authors were always consistent in equating the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God who came among us as a man, Jesus, with the God who had delivered Israel out of Egypt.)

In a sense the understanding of God as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," even referring to God as "God" or as "He" becomes a shorthand for the many saving actions of the living God among us human beings. When we speak of God, we mean the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God revealed to us in Christ, the God who led Moses to guide

the Israelites those 40 years in the desert, the God who raised up David and Samuel...One God; the Trinity summarizes all those many stories: deliverance, resurrection, presence, Pentecost. It is not meant to be speculative philosophy as much as description of observed reality here on planet earth.

[Who are we Christians talking about when we speak of God? This God, who delivered the people Israel, whom Jesus has made clear for all the world. Not some god who requires child sacrifice; not some god who responds to temple prostitution, not some god who loves rich people and looks down on poor people, not some god whose body is the world and whose future destiny will evolve inseparably from it, not some god who dwells in remote transcendence and who has no Son and no present Spirit active and abiding in believers. (Curious how we modern humans have created categories so that generic descriptions appear to align nicely—inevitably so. We assume there must be one God; whomever created the whole show, whoever is in charge, must by definition be God. All candidates for God must be equally worthy, equally convincing. Nonsense! It's God who has done the creating; reality corresponds to who God is as God exists, and always has existed, independently of our puny human constructs and concepts. Some of our constructs are more accurate in describing this God than others because some more closely align with the Reality than others do. Runaway political correctness is nothing compared to the Truth of God!)]

There are still believers today, and some of us in this congregation, who believe that one or several of these positions which lost out the historical debate had the more valid argument; some of you hold that positions widely rejected by the Church and its Councils more accurately describe the reality of the nature of God. Fortunately, passing these theological and Christological exams is not the litmus test for the life of faith; not the final to the class; not what Peter will ding you for at those pearly gates. (As you have heard, the exam is how you live your life. Thank God it's Jesus who corrects your exam, and He's crazy about you!)

Another way of thinking of the nature of God would be to picture what insight we would lack did we not envision God as triune (three in one). If we thought of God as the First Person, Father only, we would rightly understand God as removed and remote. "High and lifted up—" but then how able to identify with us in our weaknesses and predicaments and sin?" In what sense could we speak of "God is love" if God were only far distant from us and far above us and far superior to us humans? Yes, God is separate, and holy, and transcendent—but God is more than this. How could we even begin to understand a God existing only in a higher dimension; how could an ant begin to understand a human? How could hear from such a deity in prayer or enjoy any communion with Him?

If we thought of God as Second Person, Son only, we would rightly understand God as being concerned for us, eager to come alongside us and communicate to us and teach us and forgive us and redeem us. But we know God is not only Jesus; Jesus obeyed the Father and prayed to the Father. Never do the Scriptures identify Jesus unequivocally with God, and in several places Jesus distances Himself from being identified with the Father [more on this next week.] All of God could not fit into Jesus any more than all the light in all the stars in the galaxies could fit into my flashlight bulb. But Jesus shows us who God is, and who each of us human beings is meant to be.

If we thought of God as Third Person, Spirit only, we would properly understand how God is so near to us He is literally available within us. Thru prayer and sometimes as simple grace, as a freebie, God communicates with us and will direct our lives. But we know God exists apart from our human processes and persons; God is not limited even to the processes of nature. God exists apart from the creation; God exists in sovereign independence separate from anyone or anything else.

In this triune sense the Scriptures can tell us “God is love.” [1 John 4:8] God was love before Jesus came to show us who God is. God was love before there were people to love. God will be love when there is no more planet earth. But it seems to me that a unitary God could not be a “God who is love.” God would be incomplete and unable to love were there not a Trinity or at least a Duality intrinsic in the nature of God. Love must have an object. Me loving myself or the Father loving Himself is hardly love.

Seventeen centuries ago and for most of the time since, most of the Church understood and defined the Triune nature of God as One essence existing in three distinct Persons. This language about the “essence” of things tells us a lot about the way those early Christians thought. We do not need to be locked into a Fourth Century definition. What I want to lock into is what Jesus has to say. Jesus tells us God is something like family: at least Father and Son, [and the Fourth Gospel thinks Holy Spirit also: eternal,] mutually respectful, reciprocally loving, united in purpose, independent yet interdependent.

Not quite like water, which can exist as steam or water or ice. Not quite like St Patrick’s fabled object lesson of the three-leaf clover: God is three, God is one. Not quite like dancers and music. Not quite “Giver, Gift, and Giving.” (But that’s a lot better than Huey, Dewey, and Louie.) Words fall short! (Centuries ago, and no doubt today, the Church got some of it wrong. The trouble is I’m not always sure which part.)

It would all be more simple for us to understand had God been courteous enough to have consulted us and existed in a less complex and less infinite form. But the point of our inquiry is to encounter and serve and obey and worship “The God Who is There” (Francis Schaeffer’s phrase) rather than the God we wish we could understand and manage and define and therefore control.

Maybe the sermon we heard Paul preaching in Pisidian Antioch captures what it all amounts to a lot more significantly than technical theology. Paul was one brilliant theologian—but when asked to preach, what did he want his hearers to know about God? According to Luke, anyway, Paul wanted them to know

It was God who chose Israel out of all the peoples of the earth.

It was God who led the people out of Egypt, not Moses and Aaron and their bravery.

It was God who raised up Deborah, Gideon, Barak, Samson, the judges. They didn’t raise up themselves.

It was God who overcame the seven nations already inhabiting Canaan. The armies of Israel had to fight the battles, but God decided the outcome.

It was God who gave Israel king Saul (by Samuel, whom God gave to Israel) and it was God who removed king Saul. It was not simply politics as usual.

It was God who brought the Savior to Israel: Jesus. Not by whim or by accident, but as God had promised centuries before.

It was God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Paul understands God to be the One who presides over history, who is active in the affairs of men and women. Paul greatly enjoyed his relationship with the risen Christ thru His Spirit; Paul was praying constantly. Paul plumbed the depths of theology as few ever have. Paul was an uncommonly well-trained mind and disciplined thinker.

But his best theology consisted of his obedience: each new year, each new journey, each new acquaintance, each new opportunity, each decision, each day, each moment—his best theology consisted of entering as fully as he possibly could into the service of his God. God who was sovereign above all; God who had forgiven Him and appeared to Him in Christ the risen Son; God who spoke to him and guided and encouraged Him moment-to-moment in the Spirit.

However you understand the God to whom you pray: how are you living out your faith in God? How well are you doing in discovering and living out your God-assignment? To whom are you taking the cup of cool water in His name? Are you loving one another as Jesus loves His Church? How eagerly are you allowing the Holy Spirit of God to transform you more and more into the image of Christ? Are you bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life, and abiding abundantly in Him?

May God grant that you are each one becoming day by day a great theologian. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen