



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Trinity Sunday – May 30, 2021

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

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

Today is Trinity Sunday. For just about 700 years now, the western church has set this Sunday aside for reflection on the Trinity. We do this because the Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith, yet its power in Christian life can get lost if we're not careful, amid a tangle of theological distinctions and philosophical speculation. And yet its importance is paramount. It reveals the God who is the ground and center of our lives.

Many years ago as a young Wycliffe student, one of my professors introduced us to the Trinity – I kid you not - through a movie called “Nuns on the Run.” Strange you might think, but it was actually a great way to begin the conversation.

Don't know if you've seen it, but Eric Idle of Monty Python fame, and Robbie Coltrane play Brian Hope and Charlie McManus. They are a pair of villains who want to go straight. But having never earned an honest dime, they need to finance their new life and so they steal some loot from some fellow villains. Of course, they're found out and need to go into hiding. When their car runs out of gas in front of a convent, Brian and Charlie run inside and disguise themselves as nuns. Hilarity and high-speed chases ensue - and you've pretty much got the gist.

It's not a piece of great cinematic art, but there are good moments. Like when Charlie – a life-long devoted Catholic – despite some obvious evidence to the contrary – tries to explain the Trinity to his largely ignorant friend in the spirit of trying to act the part of a nun with some integrity.

The conversation goes like this:

Charlie says: See, you've got the Father, the Son and the holy ghost. But the three are one - like a shamrock, my old priest used to say.

"Three leaves, but one leaf." Now, the father sent down the son, who was love, and then when he went away, he sent down the holy spirit, who came down in the form of a...

Brian says: You told me already - a ghost.

Charlie says : No, a dove.

Brian: The dove was a ghost?

Charlie: No, the ghost was a dove.

Brian again: Okay, let me try and summarize this: God is his son. And his son is God. But his son moonlights as a holy ghost, a holy spirit, and a dove. And they all send each other, even though they're all one and the same thing.

Charlie: You've got it. You really could be a nun!

Later in the film, when poor old Brian somehow ends up having to teach a theology class in the service of his disguise, he tries to recall the Trinitarian formula that Brian taught him, and he says: "God is like a shamrock, small, green and divisible by three!"

This is a pretty good demonstration of the difficulty of explaining the Trinity – and how easily it can go sideways. It speaks to the difficulty of trying to define God.

And yet it's not enough to throw our hands up and simply declare it a mystery either.

So it's instructive to at least think about what we can know about the Trinity – about our God: not in order to closely define it, but perhaps in order to treasure and value the relationship that it describes.

And all we know of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is found in the Bible – the record of God's relationship with his people.

So we have a couple of snapshots this morning of what scripture says about the Trinity:

The first one – the prophet Isaiah inside a powerful vision of God. He is experiencing the almost overwhelming power and majesty of God – the holiness and if you like, the other-ness of God. And yet, despite the distance between Isaiah and God in this moment, God invites Isaiah into a relationship – he forgives his sins and then sends him to tell his people about who God is.

Now if you're following the lectionary as I always do, there's another reading that we haven't included today because of time. I'd urge you to have a look at it though because I'd say it was Snapshot two – it's psalm 29 – the writer of this song praise and wonder is also trying to convey the big-ness of God. Trying to convey an experience of transcendence.

“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. The psalmist writes, Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.”

The psalmist is trying to convey the truth that God is not small, but is over all, in all, and under ALL, that we humans understand. They end by saying:

“May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!”

Snapshot number three is in our Gospel. Nicodemus, a leader in the Jewish faith community – a faithful man who is trying hard to understand who Jesus really was, comes to Jesus in or “by” night. I can’t help feeling that the Gospel writer makes use of metaphor when he says that Nicodemus comes to under cover of darkness – the night is hard to see clearly in, it’s inky blackness obscures the true appearance of things and is like a spiritual blindness. But when he meets Jesus - the light of the world - he is spiritually enlightened and his soul, his body, his being is lighter – he gains an understanding AND a direction for his life.

And when Nicodemus describes Jesus as a teacher come from God, although this is an inadequate statement at the level he means it, at a higher level it is ONE of the things that Jesus is - and what Nicodemus needs in that moment in order to believe! For Jesus is the Son whom the Father sent to make him known to the world.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again to understand who he is, and therefore who God is – this is a way of telling this faithful man that he doesn’t have the full picture – that in order to understand, he needs to start again and experience a new relationship with God.

Last snapshot: the beautiful reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Roman church that Bill read for us this morning. St. Paul writing to US – a community who knows the whole story – an Eastered community - who has all the parts of our great story at our command. In this great letter of love, St. Paul synthesizes all we know – and he works out the implications of all that we know. He tells us that because we now know what God is like because of our experience of Jesus, who has shown us what God’s love is like; because we now know the power of the Holy Spirit because we have been comforted and galvanized into action by that same Spirit, it’s time to take into ourselves the full realization that we aren’t just spectators of this relationship between Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – we’re caught up in it! We’re in the middle of it.

You see, God doesn’t want us to be mere spectators – God wants us to be part of it – right in the thick of it – soaking up all that love and motivation and to take it out and give it away.

This is why God comes near to us in the first place in Jesus – to gather us up in relationship with him – to put us right at the centre. That’s what all that language of adoption and inheritance is about – St. Paul uses it to explain how in love, God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – brings us in intentional and deep love and commitment into relationship with him.

Four snapshots – each revealing to us something of who God is – showing us that dynamic relationship between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Showing us who each member of the three-personned God, IS.

It’s a foundational – although not easy – belief that forms the foundation of our faith: in fact, the three-in-one defines Christianity as opposed to other religions. And from the earliest days of the Church we can see that it was a complicated doctrine for us. There were so many controversies in the early Church about it. But the hymn we’ve sung this morning called Nicaea – named after the great council of the year 325 which produced the definitive statement of Trinitarian faith, that we still live with today - is number one in our hymn book. Number one – there’s a message there about the primary importance of taking into ourselves – as much as we are able – who our God is.

The story of God – the God who is always sending, always in motion, always moving out towards the other – is evident in the relationship between Jesus and the Father and Spirit in the Gospels.

THIS is why it’s important to understand the Trinity: because if we are caught up in this same relationship, it means that God is always sending us out – in constant movement towards the world – in a fluid motion.

And as our church wakes up to the fact that we need to live outside our walls; to be a blessing in the world, we also begin to realize that God is already out there ahead of us in that constant motion towards his people – working at relationships with God’s world. And God leads us and directs us – Father, and Son and Holy Spirit – to pattern our relationships on the Trinitarian one. God comes close to us. And we are to come close to each other and to all those who, like Nicodemus, do not yet know the whole story of God in our world.

Because we have a trinitarian theology we cannot believe in a God that is distant, or aloof, or unreachable. All of the expressions of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, are about relationship – all about being in relationship with US, and with the world that God created.

I could go on forever about why the Trinity is important, (I could, but I won’t, don’t worry) but just let me say this: I read a good article this past week by Diana Butler Bass who asks in it, a very important question – one that’s on our minds a lot: What is the future of the church, post-pandemic?

After wending her way through various observations, she comes to this conclusion:

“The word religion is believed to have come from the Latin, religare, meaning to “bind” or “reconnect.” Religare is about mending what has been broken, recovering what has been mislaid, and reconnecting that which is frayed.”

Therefore, [she says] the church will “need [by following the lead and drawing on the power of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – that’s my addition] to be about this work of relocation – finding what [and who] has been lost, repairing what [and who] have been broken, and re-grounding people into their own lives and communities.”

And, another addition from me, the church will also need to, with the eyes of her heart enlightened, seek for the future that God is laying out in front of us. It’s there folks, if we listen and talk and discern it together: to join God’s energy and priorities.

There’s no going back now; there’s only going forward with great love and commitment.

And we can trust God’s leading: because we know that the Trinity is about a God for us, who lives as a blessing for the poor and mourners, confronts the power of evil, enters with compassion into the world of human suffering, breaks down the barriers between human sin and divine holiness - and reconciles enemies.

That’s our holy, and awesome, and loving God.

In the name of the three in one. Amen.