

Trinity Sunday is a strange day. Trinity Sunday is the one Sunday of the church year when we celebrate a doctrine, the one Sunday when we celebrate a belief about who God is. The rest of the year we focus on the teachings of Jesus, events in his life, and other stories about God's people. But today, we focus on a what seems to be a rather abstract belief about the very nature of God.

Today, our focus is on the Trinity. Our focus is on who God is. Our focus is on how we experience God in the persons we traditionally call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It took the early Christians nearly 300 years of painful debates, heated discussions, and numerous council meetings to try to define what the Trinity is. And even after the councils of the church agreed about what the Trinity is, their statements about that belief often seem artificial; and their statements often seem somewhat hard to understand.

One ancient creed, the Athanasian Creed, says the following:

"We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For... they are not three eternal, but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible."¹

You're probably glad we don't use this creed in worship every Sunday. You read stuff like this and say, "Huh?" I'm glad the Athanasian creed uses the word "incomprehensible," because incomprehensible seems to be the operative word here. Trying to explain the Holy Trinity is trying to explain something incomprehensible. Whenever we try to explain the reality of God, our words fail us. There is no way our limited vocabularies and thought processes can capture the reality and totality of God's own nature.

Even our pronouns and our ideas of gender are insufficient. To simply call God "He" or "Him" does not capture the fullness of God's being. God is more than "male" as human beings understand "maleness." The first chapter of Genesis says that God created humankind in his image, in the image of God, "male and female he created them."²

Though many old paintings show God the Father as a white bearded old man, this image certainly doesn't capture the totality of God's being. God the Father is more than ""Him" or "He." But, at the same time, God is also more than "Her" or "She." God is somehow both male and female, and yet, somehow neither male nor female. However, if we start referring to God in neutral terms like "It," then we lose the wonderful intimacy of knowing God as Person. Our language limits us.

It also seems like bad math. $1+1+1$ should equal 3. But in the case of the Trinity, $1+1+1 = 1$. God is one. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one. We don't have three gods. We have one God, in Trinity of person and unity of being.

¹ BCP p 864

² Gen 1:27

When we're talking about God, the limits of our language and our mathematics fail us. We run into a brick wall. Any time we try to limit the infinite reality of who and what God is with our finite human thoughts or words or categories, we're in trouble. It is a difficult thing for the community of faith to grasp and define what the Trinity is.

And yet, the early Christians didn't invent the doctrine of the Trinity out of whole cloth. Rather, the early Christians developed the idea of the Trinity because they had no other choice. Let me say that again. The early Christians developed the idea of the Trinity because they had no other choice.

In fact, the early Christian movement tried out every other possible explanation. But they came to the final realization that a Trinitarian understanding of God is the only explanation that fits the facts. Every other possible explanation about God's nature takes us off on some tangent to a place where we don't want to go.

This all happened 1,500 years before Sherlock Holmes. But Sherlock Holmes's words certainly apply to the Holy Trinity. "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

After exhausting every avenue, the early Christians finally came to the realization that the Holy Trinity was the only piece that would fit the hole in the center of the jigsaw puzzle.

3 in 1 and 1 in 3 was the only possible solution to the equation. The Trinity is the only way of understanding God that is fully congruent with the proclamation in Holy Scripture as well as the experience of God's people throughout the ages.

As Christians, a Trinitarian understanding is the only choice we're left with. The Holy Trinity is not an option. It's not something so abstract or esoteric or outdated that we can dispose of it at will. Instead, it is the only explanation that fully fits a Christian understanding of who God is. The Trinity is the only model that fully fits scripture, tradition, and reason.

In Scripture, we encounter a Trinitarian God. The actual word 'Trinity' never appears in Holy Scripture. But a Trinitarian understanding of God is implicit in the New Testament.

Our Gospel reading today from John is a prime example. Jesus talks to his disciples about the Father and about the Spirit. Jesus tells his disciples that "All the Father has is mine", and all that is mine, "the Spirit will declare to you."³ The message of the truth that Jesus proclaims was given by the Father, and after Jesus leaves, the message of truth will be given by the Spirit. Jesus also speaks of the relationship between himself and the Father and the Spirit.

This is the crux of the matter. This is the central reason that the early Christians had to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity. We need the idea of the Trinity because we believe that God the Father created us. We need the idea of the Trinity because we believe that Jesus of Nazareth lived among us as a human being, and because we believe that Jesus is somehow God,

³ John 16:15

both fully human as well as fully divine. We also need the idea of the Trinity because we believe that God is still present and active among us through the work of the Holy Spirit.

All three persons of the Trinity are equally God. They all appear in scripture. And those facts force us to affirm the reality of the Trinity.

God as 'three in one and one in three' is the supreme paradox of Christianity. It doesn't make sense when viewed in terms of the world's wisdom. $1+1+1=1$. It is something so outrageous that no one in their right mind would make it up.

And yet the Trinity is also the most powerful and magnificent possible form of Good News. It is at the very core of the Christian proclamation.

The Lord God Almighty is the Sovereign Creator and Ruler of everything. This Creator God is the one who called all things into being simply by speaking. This Creator God made a universe of such immense size, that if we were to try to count all the stars in the universe a million at a time every second, it would still take us more than six billion years to count them all.⁴ 1 million stars... 2 million stars... 3 million stars... 6 billion years to count them all at this speed, longer than the earth itself has existed. Try to wrap your mind around that kind of immensity. And God created this universe.

It's no wonder that when this God appears to people and speaks to people, they are blown away by the experience.

When God speaks to the children of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they are so scared they ask Moses to speak to God on their behalf ever after.⁵

When God appears to Isaiah in the Temple, Isaiah says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"⁶ Isaiah's encounter with the Lord of Heaven and Earth leaves him with the realization of God's awesome transcendence, God's otherness, God's lofty separation from anything in normal human experience.

And yet, this awesome God speaks to Isaiah; just as he has spoken to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses, to Elijah, and to countless others. And in doing so, God reveals something amazing about himself. The God who made the universe, the Sovereign Lord of Space and Time, is interested in us. This God is not distant and aloof. This God is not separate from us. God, the creator of the universe, wants relationship with us. That's amazing. But God doesn't stop there.

God loves the world so much that he sends Jesus Christ. God's love for us is so great that God becomes a human being, he becomes one of us. In Jesus of Nazareth, God empties himself of differentness, of otherness, of transcendence. God becomes someone we can touch, and hear,

⁴ An estimated 2×10^{23} stars, 6.34 billion years to count them 1 million at a time

⁵ Exodus 20:19

⁶ Isaiah 6:5

and talk to, and see. God in the person of Jesus Christ brings redemption to us. That's amazing. But God doesn't stop there.

God sends his own Holy Spirit to be among us and within us. God's Holy Spirit stands beside us, comforts us, aids us, and instructs us. The Holy Spirit is intimately near to us, as near as the wind on our faces. God in the person of the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. That's amazing. But God doesn't stop there.

As Paul tells us in Romans, through Jesus Christ, and through the action of the Holy Spirit, God adopts us as daughters and sons. We no longer have to say with Isaiah, "Woe is me! I am lost." Instead, we are given the right to call God "Abba/Father/Daddy."⁷ We are made God's heirs. We are made joint heirs with Jesus Christ, and we can share in the benefits of Jesus' suffering and glory.

The wonderful, amazing Good News of the Trinity is that God, the transcendent and all-powerful creator and ruler of the universe does not choose to remain separate and aloof from his creation. The Good News is that God so loves the world that he has chosen to be intimately present with us in the person of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. The Good News is that God continues to be present with us in the person of the Holy Spirit, our Sanctifier. God is not only all-powerful and Holy and different and transcendent. God is also all-loving and merciful and immanently with us.

Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God almighty, in Trinity of persons and in unity of being.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be his Kingdom, now and forever.

⁷ Romans 8:15-16