

SERMON, ST JOHN'S TRINITY SUNDAY

Believe it or not, I remember my first Trinity Sunday. My mother seldom took us to church, but on Trinity Sunday, 1961, when I was six, she inexplicably dragged my brother and me to the rather high Church of the Ascension near where we lived at the time in Portsmouth, England. I remember that overwhelming sense of boredom that little kids have in church until the congregation, choking on clouds of incense, belted out that great hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy." My brother and I looked at one another and collapsed into a very unseemly fit of giggles because all we could think of was "holey socks," yes, socks with holes in them! Remember, those were the days when you didn't toss your holey socks into the rubbish – you lovingly saved them in a little pile in the closet so your mother could darn them. I remember vividly those long English winter evenings when my mother sat by the coal fire knitting and darning socks while old episodes of Lassie and Rawhide flickered on the black and white TV. "Holey, Holey, Holey," indeed! My brother and I laughed about that for years. How else could a little kid imagine this to be anything else but "holey" socks? After all, do any of us really know what "holy" means intellectually? If you think you do, please tell me, because, honestly, if we think we can define the holy with clever words, then we've probably missed the point entirely.

Trinity Sunday is, of course, an occasion to celebrate the "holy," because on this day we enter into the mystery of the very nature of God. Think about it: this is actually the only day in the Christian year when we celebrate a theological principle and not an event, or so it seems. I would like to suggest in a moment that, in actual fact, the Trinity, too, is an event and not simply a passive concept. In the meantime, let's consider some of the ways that people down the ages have attempted to define both the idea of the "Holy" and the Trinity. I remember one day sitting in the beautiful old church of Trinity San Jose, now the cathedral of the Diocese of El Camino Real, and gazing up at a lovely old Victorian stained glass window that illustrated the "meaning" of the Holy Trinity. It is called "The Shield of the Trinity." You may have seen this somewhere yourself because it's quite common. Essentially, it's a neat mathematical equation: a triangle with Father, Son and Holy Ghost written at each of the three angles and the words "is not the" on each side. So, it reads, "The Father is not the Son is not the Holy Ghost is not the Father is not the Son" and so on ad infinitum. Then, in the center of the triangle is the word "God" with lines connected to the three angles on which is written the word "is." So, we have the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Ghost is God." What a clever little diagram! Now, as easy as "two plus two", I've figured out the Holy Trinity! Yikes!

The early Church Fathers, being mostly men (and they were, sadly, all men!) steeped in the arcane intricacies of Greek philosophy, made a valiant attempt to define the Holy Trinity rationally. The most complex, even preposterous, product of these attempts is illustrated in the so-called "Athanasian Creed," so-called because it was likely composed some hundred years after the life of St. Athanasius, the great theologian of Alexandria, who may have been the author of the Nicene Creed. The Athanasian Creed can be found in the "Historic Documents" section of our Prayer Book. Listen to the language it employs to "explain" the Trinity:

“the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity,
neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.
For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.
But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory
equal, the Majesty co-eternal.
Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.
The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.
The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost
incomprehensible.
The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.
And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal.
As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and
one incomprehensible.”

“Incomprehensible indeed!!” And it continues in the same vein, seemingly forever, for this is not even 25% of the text of the Creed’s convoluted and dizzying Trinitarian mathematical equation! Don’t get me wrong: I personally **love** this language from the Early Church – indeed, I am one of the last remaining clergy who can get teary-eyed reciting the Nicene Creed. However, is this language really adequate in defining the Holy Trinity? Can the Holy be defined at all?

Rudolph Otto, the early 20th century German theologian, made a valiant attempt at pinning down the meaning of the Holy in his great work, “The Idea of the Holy.” It is, he wrote, the “Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans,” the “tremendous and fascinating mystery.” Actually, note that though his work was written in German, it worked much better to attempt the definition in Latin, rendering it remote and other worldly. Also, look at how totally inadequate the English is by comparison with the “mystical” Latin. What Otto is referring to is something that people in Hawai’i have always known and celebrated, if not understood (because it can’t be!): “Chicken Skin.”

The Truth is that, as the author of the great 14th century mystical work, “The Cloud of Unknowing,” writes, “The Cloud of Unknowing can only be pierced by the fierce arrows of Love.” I would hazard a guess that all of us fell in love with God first and then attempted to figure out what it means intellectually. The cart can’t go before the horse and there is no doubt in my mind that the Creeds, all the theologies, even the Scriptures are the cart that comes after the start of the love affair that constitutes the true heart of Faith. Faith is a **relationship** with God and, consequently, with one another. It is not intellectual assent to doctrine, no matter how clever or even mathematically satisfying that doctrine might be. Honestly, do you really think that many people come to St. John’s, hear the Nicene Creed, then fall down and worship? No, the worshipper falls on his or her knees in love and adoration, **then** tackles the Creed, perhaps even finding joy and meaning in it!

St. Augustine, wrote, with respect to ethics, that as long as we love we can do whatever we like. He also came up with a superb way of not attempting to comprehend intellectually the Holy Trinity, but of embracing it as an exquisite sign and demonstration of God’s Love. He wrote that Love itself is triune, consisting of the three necessary elements: The Lover, who is God the Father (or Mother); the Beloved, who is Jesus (and by extension, us, his Body), and the

Love itself, who is the Holy Spirit. If God is Love, then God is Love in eternity and because Love requires expression, God has always poured out that Love on the Beloved within the Trinity. As we say in the Nicene Creed, Christ is “eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father, Through him all things were made.” Seemingly complex words rooted in the language of Platonic philosophy, and yet making the gloriously simple point that God’s Love finds expression in eternity and that within the love of the Holy Trinity is the foundation of the Universe, the ultimate law and reality of all things, and therefore the model for our lives. This is really the essence of the teaching of Jesus. It is for this that he gave his life on the cross, and Resurrection is the sign that this Love is ultimately triumphant, despite the pain and suffering the world continues to endure. God is not a remote theological concept, but the ground of our being in whom we find our true selves when we offer ourselves to the Beloved. Our celebration of the Holy Trinity on this day, therefore, should call us not to theological calisthenics, where we intellectually parse and dissect the meaning of its truth, but to fall on our knees and worship with a Love and awe that words cannot adequately express. The Trinity is truly an event because it can only be properly understood in terms of God’s eternal **action** in pouring out his/her Love before and within Creation. Adoring the Holy, who has first loved us, we are then called to go forth from this place genuinely to adore one another.