

Trinity Sunday, Year A, 2008

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The Church calls the Sunday following the Feast of Pentecost, “Trinity Sunday,” because on this day the Church celebrates the Christian understanding that God reveals himself to us in three “persons,” God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This doctrine dates to the earliest days of the Church. Trinity Sunday follows the Feast of Pentecost because, with Pentecost and its revelation of God as Holy Spirit, God's manifestation to his creation is complete. God the Father, revealed to us in the very Creation that God the Father created; God the Son, revealed by the Incarnation and Christ's Passion and Resurrection; and, God the Holy Spirit, revealed by the Pentecost that we celebrated a week ago, today. The Church teaches that God has three persons, each a separate identity, yet there is only one God. In Christian understanding, we can only know God in these three persons.

Is this confusing? You had better believe that it is. But, this is the historic Christian faith, the doctrine and dogma of all truly orthodox Christian bodies. And this is important: not a single one of us truly understand this doctrine. The Trinity is a mystery, just as the Incarnation is a mystery. So, if you are among those who are confused by the doctrine of the Trinity, you are in very good company. The Church clings to this doctrine because Christians have always experienced God in the three persons of the Trinity. We know God as “Father,” the Creator and God of the entire universe, who loves us so much that he wants us to experience him as Father, as *Abba* in the Aramaic language of Jesus. *Abba* translates as “daddy.” If you think about that, it is a powerful thing. Jesus taught that God the Father wants to be our spiritual “daddy.” That is about as assuring and comforting as any relationship with the holy can ever be.

We also know God as “Son.” Without understanding the mystery, because mysteries, by definition defy understanding, we believe that God took on human flesh and, in Jesus Christ, became one of us. In the creed we say that he came down from Heaven. He entered created time and space and became one of us, subject, Scripture says, to temptation just as we are, but he did not sin. He took our sins upon himself, and offered them to God in the sacrifice of his life for us. Through him, we have salvation. We believe, because of Christ's own teaching and the consistent teaching of the Church from the earliest times, that Jesus is our spiritual brother. Through him, through his sacrifice for us, we are part of God's own family and we are brothers and sisters in spirit with all who are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Lord.

When we feel the power of God in this world, when we find our hearts burning for Jesus, when longed-for, prayed-for miracles happen, when we sense divine protection or divine power to accomplish those things that accord with God's purpose, we know God as “Holy Spirit.” It is the Spirit of God working with us and in us that allows us to be disciples of Jesus and to do the work of God in this world. With God the Holy Spirit guiding us, empowering us, enabling us and encouraging us, we can do all things appropriate, necessary and good that please God and help to build his Kingdom in this world. Without the Holy Spirit, we can do none of this. The Holy Spirit teaches us, the Holy Spirit leads us, and the Holy Spirit mentors us. The Holy Spirit is the active person of God Almighty in this world. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit that, “taught our hearts to fear,” in the words of John Newton, author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, and it is the Holy Spirit that brought us the grace to overcome that fear. It is the Holy Spirit that leads us to salvation in Jesus, the Son of God.

The doctrine is confusing, very confusing, but the Church teaches this because we believe that it is the only explanation for our experience of God. One way to get a handle on Trinitarian doctrine is to understand the mindset of early church theologians. They lived in a post-Hellenistic world still influenced by Greek culture and philosophy. Greek culture and philosophy gave the early Christian

theologians useful tools in formulating their theology and thus their understanding of God. In early Greek theater, only men were actors and each actor would play multiple parts. To convey the different characters, they would put on masks, called, in Greek, *personas*. This word gives us the word “person.” In Greek theater, the actor might be several “persons,” but in reality he was only one actor. The Church Fathers borrowed this concept to explain how it is that we experience and therefore know God. And, on this Trinity Sunday, we praise God in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen*.

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