

Happy Trinity Sunday. I hope you all got your Trinity cards in the mail on time, have your Trinity cakes baking in the oven, and went online to find the perfect Trinity gifts for your three favorite people, even though Trinity Sunday seems to get more commercial every year. I mean, is it just me, or have you been seeing ads with trefoils and shields and icons of Patrick and Athanasius since Candlemas? Although, I appreciate a good three-for-one deal as much as the next Christian.

Of course none of this actually happens, because Trinity Sunday celebrates the distinctively Christian, and notoriously challenging, understanding about how God exists, the mind-bending assertion that there is one God who exists in three persons. You can't commercialize what you can't conceptualize, though I almost wish someone would try. But you can find inspiration in mystery.

The concept of the Trinity was meant to hold Christians together. We've been arguing about it ever since. But not as much as before, which is something. Christian understanding of the Trinity developed gradually in the early church and was only finally codified as the doctrine we have now in the fifth century. Before that, the Council of Nicea endorsed the divinity of Christ, declaring that Jesus is one with the God of Israel, equal in substance and eternity. And before that, the word "trinity" had been batted around by Christian writers but did not have a precise meaning; that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit could all be said to be divine, in some way or another, was about all that Christians agreed on.

It may be hard for us to picture this state of theological flux and incoherence, at least, for those of us who haven't been to seminary. But it's easier to understand when you realize that the writers of the documents that would become the New Testament canon, and the Apostles, and Jesus himself, were not trying to spread systematic theology *about* Jesus, but relationship *with* Jesus, and the teachings *of* Jesus. That relationship and those teachings should remain the Church's focus, which may be why only one Sunday of the liturgical year is devoted to a doctrine. That being said, the doctrine of the Trinity does connect with these higher priorities; it can strengthen Christian unity, purpose, and hope.

For some of the earliest Christians, the important thing was to protect the monotheism that the Jewish tradition had worked so hard to accept, understand, and defend. With great effort, a line had been drawn between creator and creation, between the One who was worthy of worship, and the whole creation who gave that worship. Trinitarian thought was a way of placing worship of Jesus Christ within that framework by placing Jesus above the line, declaring that he is one with God and therefore an acceptable object of worship. Obviously not all Jews found this argument persuasive, but the effort to keep the family together, as it were, is no less noble as a result.

Another attempt at using the Trinity to foster unity among believers came in the midst of the Arian controversy of the fourth century. The Council of Nicea was convened by Emperor Constantine because Christian disputes of doctrine, discipline, and practice

were becoming intense, and he wanted unity and concord in the Church. Every bishop in the world was invited, their travel expenses paid by the Empire, and Constantine vowed to support whatever the bishops agreed upon. In particular, a group within the Church led by Arius was teaching that Jesus was created by God, and therefore not equal with God.

This troubled the majority greatly, in part because it contradicted the corpus of Christian texts that was becoming widely accepted as Scripture. Another reason to challenge the Arian party was because it directly threatened the Christian hope, for, if Jesus wasn't divine, his incarnation was a fiction; if Jesus wasn't God, his death and resurrection would be insufficient to redeem the world from sin and death. After much debate, and the occasional physical altercation, all but two bishops signed on to the statement affirming the divinity of Christ that would become known as the Nicene Creed, and the two who remained Arian were excommunicated.

Much as I enjoy debunking heresies, if I were going to tackle all the attempts that had been made to separate Christians from our faith in the Trinity, faith that gives us unity, hope, and purpose, I'd be here all day. Good theology is important, but there's more to the Christian life than doctrine. Doctrine guides and enlightens us, and ideally unifies us, but it is no substitute for a relationship with God, a commitment to follow Jesus, and participation in the life of the Holy Spirit as she has provided in the Church. Scripture tells us that God is Love, and the doctrine of the Trinity posits that the very nature of God is an eternal relationship of mutual love, shared perfectly between the three persons of the one God.

You can look at this as an opportunity to bend your mind around the mystery of how God can be three in one, and one in three, but you're better off seeing it as an opportunity to bend your heart around the necessity of living in love, gracious, generous love, with the people around you. The more divided we become, the more we need to remember that relationship is inescapable, and care for the poor and the stranger is essential. We might even dare to love our enemies, because loving interrelationship is baked into the nature of reality itself, for God created heaven and earth out of God's own nature.

God has revealed the fact of the Trinity to us, but not an explanation for how it works, because our minds cannot comprehend — cannot enclose — the fullness of the nature of God. I believe God left us in this awkward position to further God's work of convincing us that we need God, and that we need each other, and that we ought to approach both God and one another with love, always with love. Considering how persistently humanity has resisted and rebelled against these messages, it makes sense that God would go so far to impress them upon us.

If you can accept the Trinity, find strength in it; wear it like a breastplate as Saint Patrick did. If you can't, then accept the mystery, the deep, unknowable love of God that pervades heaven and earth. Either way, or as a good Anglican I should say both ways,

welcome the unity, hope, and purpose that God offers, both through mystery and through understanding. For its power to draw us nearer to the love of God, and to send us out to do God's work in the world, the Trinity is a mystery for which we may be eternally grateful.