

ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

NEW YORK CITY

THE HOLY TRINITY

Matthew 28:16-20

First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday, May 18, 2008

The doctrine of the holy Trinity has often been challenged. Moderns may argue that the doctrine really belongs to earlier times when people tried to define as carefully as they could the finer points of theology. They claim contemporary folk neither care for these theological refinements nor accept teachings that do not lend themselves to scientific proof. However, Christian theology is not so naïve as to create doctrine simply for the sake of argument or refinement. Nor is it true that people today are so advanced that they have outgrown the need for the comfort that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity provides. There is good reason for us to celebrate this day, with gusto and great joy, and to meditate on the Holy Trinity.

Before we continue with our study it will be important to give a definitive statement concerning the Trinity: “The distinctive and essential Christian doctrine that there is one God in three Persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. There is a distinction between the Persons so that the Father is not the Son, the Father is not the Spirit, and the Son is not the Spirit. Each is a Person. The Holy Spirit is not to be envisioned as a mere force or influence.”

In the holy Gospel appointed for today we do have the baptismal formula as expressed by our Lord. God is named as the Trinity, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”; however, this is not explained. We arrive at the doctrine of the Trinity by deduction, because the truth is well substantiated in Scripture in many places and in various ways. What is more important, the entire biblical treatment of the Trinity takes the doctrine out of the realm of speculation and makes it wholly practical. When Christians defend the doctrine in parlor discussions, there are two dangers: (1.) On the one side there is the danger of tritheism, the danger of making Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into three separate and independent entities, and therefore into three gods. (2.) On the other hand there is the danger of Unitarianism, in which the Father alone is God, and the Son no more than a supremely great man, and the impersonal force and power.

Look to the Scripture for the Answer: In trying to explore the doctrine of the Trinity we can get our information from Scripture passages that are loaded with Trinitarian symbols, language, confession, and illustrations. We are neither polytheists nor tritheists. We do not believe in three gods. There is one God. The basis of the revelation of the Old Testament which continues to be the Judaic affirmation today, and is called the *shema*, from a Hebrew root meaning “to hear with intent to obey.” “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one: And thou shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all thy soul, and with all your strength. You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, 13-14). God is one; eternally, everlastingly one. He is one in essence, power, being, glory, and attributes. But there are three distinctions within the Godhead. This is clearly seen in Paul’s closing benediction in his second letter to the Corinthians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen” (2 Corinthians 13:14).

God the Father is over all, blessed forever. God the Son is our redeeming Savior. God the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts. We know God as our Father, as our Savior, and as the moving Spirit in our hearts. (He, who dwells in infinitude, also dwells in the confines of our hearts.) There is one God, but there are three distinctions in the Godhead, and we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Work of God: The Divine Origin of Christian Unity: The Feast of the Holy Trinity is that it celebrates the works of God. This is the way the Scriptures reveal and unfold the Holy Trinity to us. We never hear of the nature of God in Scripture unless it is somehow related to us. There is no philosophical explanation here about God. Rather, God is affirmed as the only one who has a right to first place in our lives. We are to be related to God in love.

In Ephesians 4:4-6, Paul celebrates the origin of our unity: There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Many New Testament scholars believe this was an early Christian confessional hymn, and it may well have been. The important thing to see is that it teaches us that our unity is rooted in the Holy

Trinity (“Spirit” v. 4; “Lord,” v. 5; “God” v. 6). Each of the seven great unities in verses 4-6 is connected with one of the Persons of the Trinity.

- A. The Person of the Holy Spirit and his work in bringing unity:** *“There is one body and one Spirit.”* The Holy Spirit creates the Body of Christ, of which we are members. “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (I Corinthians 12:13). The Holy Spirit creates, fills, coordinates, orchestrates, and empowers the Body of Christ. This accounts for the delightful serendipities we all experience when meeting other believers so different from us.
- B. The Person of Christ and his work in ministering unity:** *“Just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”* There is no doubt that the “one Lord” here is Jesus. First Corinthians 8:6 says: “There is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.” As our “one Lord” he creates “one faith” because he is the object and focus of our belief. Because of our “one faith” we all have participated in “one baptism”; “into the name of the Lord Jesus.” The question of water or Spirit baptism is not in view here. Rather, the passage is presenting one shared baptism. Sharing “one Lord” and “one faith” and “one baptism” brings “one hope,” which is, first, the return of Christ. “While we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).
- C. The Person of the Father and His Work in Unity:** *“One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* The emphasis is on shared paternity, all of us are brothers and sisters in Christ. After all is said and done, we have the same Father, we are family. Our unity comes from seven grand unities all rooted in the Holy Trinity: “One body; one Spirit; one hope; one Lord; one faith; one baptism; one God and Father of all.”

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
Where there is hate, may I bring love;
Where offense, may I bring pardon;
May I bring union in place of discord.

St. Francis of Assisi

What are the implications of our unity being rooted in the Holy Trinity? Simple this: our unity is eternal and unbreakable. The unity of the church is

as indestructible as the unity of God himself. It is no more possible to split the church than it is possible to split the Godhead. You and I will never be separated! Our unity is more solid than the Himalayas and more enduring than Venus or Mars.

Confessing the Trinity: The best way to confess the Holy Trinity is simply to accept in plain and honest faith what God has done for us. We dare not permit the doctrine of the Trinity to degenerate into dry and empty formulas about God. To confess the Trinity is to experience daily the grace of Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As we do this, we recognize that our celebration of the Feast of the Holy Trinity is also the celebration of the mystery of God.

All illustrations and analogies of the Trinity fall flat and cannot even come close to suggesting to us the profundity of the mystery. The height of the mystery is suggested when our Lord Jesus Christ says; “I and the Father are one,” or when he says, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” and again, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things concerning me.” This is the height of the mystery, because we cannot understand how it is possible. Yet it is also the mystery made simple and practical for us, so that we can experience it. That is the important part. To celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity is to know that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit reveal themselves as one in Christ that we might know the “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”

Wolfhart Pannenberg, the German theologian, wrote an excellent essay in which he explained the doctrine of the Trinity. Pannenberg noted, as in the lessons today, a description of the Father’s revelation in the Son through God’s Spirit.

As individuals we are mind, body, and spirit. The heavenly Father makes it possible for us to trust God’s relationships to us. Because God the Father has so revealed love and grace in the Son through the Spirit, our Lord urges us to share this experience. “Go therefore,” Christ says, “and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”