

## EXPERIENCING THE HOLY TRINITY

True or false: Trinity Sunday is one of the more popular Sundays in the Christian year because the theme of the Holy Trinity leads to such an all-time favorite. False, seems to be the prevailing answer. People tend to glaze over and turn the *mentally checked in* button to *off* as soon as the Holy Trinity gets mentioned. And why not? The whole idea of God as 3 persons in one unity is to state the obvious: We don't understand God. God is a mystery beyond our comprehension. The doctrine of the Trinity doesn't attempt to solve the mystery, just to state the obvious contradictions: We know God in these three ways and yet God is ultimately One.

I like the way Byzantine Icons picture that mystery. We see an example in the beautiful icon we display each week at the Baptismal font of the resurrected Lord Jesus descending to Hell to rescue Adam and Eve (every man, every woman) and pull them up from their graves. Jesus is shimmering with purpose and power, but behind him is a kind of dark circle. That dark circle (a Mandorla) stands for the vast unknowable mystery beyond what the story can tell and the eye can perceive. Icons of Jesus will often have him surrounded by a Mandorla to emphasize that mystery.

When we use the doctrine of the Trinity to talk about God's essence, God's ontological being, we quickly get lost because what can we really know about the inner life of God? One of the big problems is the word, *persons*. The original Greek word comes from the mask an actor would wear to represent a character in a play. So the word could also mean a *role* or *identity*. When we speak of God as three *persons* we get the sense of three very royal looking *people* up there somewhere in heaven. So, the word "*persons*" tends to be misleading.

Another way of talking about the Holy Trinity that I think is more helpful is to look at how we experience God. Understanding our experience of God as three in one is called the *Economic Trinity*. Instead of *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* you may have heard people speak of God as *Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer*. Another way to speak of God the Father is as the *Sending God*, God who loved the world so much that he sends his Son to bring life to all who meet him. We can speak of God the Son as the *Journeying God* who goes out to share our humanity, to live as one of us and to share our suffering and pain even to the point of dying for us on a cross. God the Holy Spirit is the *Connecting God* who helps make the connections between God as Father, God as Son and us. And of course we also know God as One, not as 3 Gods.

We experience God in the Sacraments. In Holy Baptism we are received as adopted children of God the Father. In our baptisms the same words are spoken to us as were spoken to Jesus at his baptism: *You are my beloved son or daughter; with you I am well pleased*. So, in Baptism we know God not only as Jesus' Father but as our Father also. In Baptism God's life is breathed into us through the Holy Spirit. *You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever*. We receive the Holy Spirit in Baptism so that our lives, our souls, become a dwelling place for God. And in Baptism we join with Christ in his death and are raised with him into new life. We receive

forgiveness and cleansing. Baptism and the renewing of our baptism is an encounter with the Triune love of God.

In Holy Communion we experience something of God's *oneness*. At supper with his disciples Jesus said that he and the Father were one. And if the disciples would be one in him then he would link them to the Father also. In Holy Communion we receive Christ Jesus' life poured out for us. We receive him in memory. *Do this in remembrance of me*. And we *receive* Jesus in bread and wine, which are more than symbols, a way to take Christ Jesus' real presence into ourselves. We are united with Christ. Through Christ we are united with God the Father. We are united with one another also. The Holy Spirit is the connector, the glue that binds us. We ask the Spirit to set apart these gifts of bread and wine to be for us Jesus' body and blood and for us to be set apart to be worthy vessels to receive these holy gifts. Holy Communion is a vital participation in the Mystery of God as three and one.

Beyond the Sacraments we experience God as Spirit through grace. Can you remember a time when you were surprised by grace? Perhaps you were reminded how precious you are in God's eyes. Perhaps you shared a graceful moment of joy and satisfaction with a loved one. Perhaps your hard heart was softened in some significant way. Such moments of grace are the work of the Holy Spirit. Our giftedness is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our strengths and abilities, our unique characteristics and the ways that God can use them to build community are the literal working out of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit. As the poet George Herbert put it, prayer is *God's breath in man returning to its source*. Our experience of God's power, God's dynamism is an encounter with the Spirit. God's power to heal is the work of the Spirit.

God's Spirit is the *Person* of God least like a *person*. We can't pin down the Spirit. We can't quantify Spirit or contain it or picture Spirit. God's Spirit is free and moving in ways that are unfathomable and beyond us.

God the Son is the *Person* of the Trinity most identifiable as a *person*, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is someone we can comprehend and relate to.

In the first church I served as an Assistant Priest in Baltimore, MD had had a fire in the 1920's or 1930's that partially destroyed their Tiffany stained glass window of the Transfiguration, probably much like the one here at St. John's. Only the image of the transfigured Christ could be saved from the window. So their East window behind the altar had a free floating Christ. Weekdays when the church was empty I used to go into the Church and talk with Jesus. I always felt he was shrugging his arms and asking me, "*well?*"

We can relate to Jesus. Whether through a stained glass window or a mental picture or a sense of Jesus present in a room or living in our heart we know instinctively that we can talk to Christ and that he will understand us. *O what a friend we have in Jesus*.

We see Christ also in all persons in need. As we serve them we serve Him. Christ, the Son of God, is bigger than the person of Jesus. He is the eternal Word proclaiming God's presence and love. We know Jesus as our Savior and serve him as our Lord.

God the Father, the Creator, is seen as in a mirror through his creation. Hymn 409, *The spacious firmament on high, with all the blue ethereal sky, and spangled heavens, a shining frame, their great Original proclaim. The heavens are telling the glory of God!* We see God through the evidence of his work. From the smallest sub atomic particle to the amazing array of galaxies, to the wonder of a new born child we see God the Creator at work.

We cannot see God the Father; he is beyond us. But Christ Jesus his Son reveals his love, shows us what he is like. God the Father is revealed in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son not to be a God of wrath, but a God of love who longs for his children to turn around and come home to him. What was the meaning of all God intended and did from the beginning of the creation Julian of Norwich asks? Love was the reason.

Julian of Norwich, who I had the great pleasure of studying this week, did not limit herself to speaking of God as Father, Son and Spirit. She could spoke eloquently of God as our *Mother*. "*Indeed, our Savior himself is our Mother for we are ever being born of him, and shall never be delivered!*" (Chapter 57) It is in that context of speaking of Jesus as Mother that she sums up her teaching on the Trinity.

*Thus in our Father, God almighty, we have our being. In our merciful Mother (Christ Jesus) we have reformation and renewal, and our separate parts are integrated into perfect humanity. In yielding to the gracious impulse of the Holy Spirit we are made perfect. Our essence is in our Father, God almighty, and in our Mother, God all-wise, and in our Lord the Holy Spirit, God all-good. Our essential nature is entire in each Person of the Trinity, who is one God. Our physical nature is in the Second Person alone, Jesus Christ. In him is the Father too, and the Holy Spirit. In and by him have we been taken out of hell with a strong arm; and out of earth's wretchedness have been wonderfully raised to heaven and united, most blessedly, to him who is our true being. And we have developed in spiritual wealth and character through all Christ's virtues, and by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. (Chapter 58, Revelations of Divine Love, Penguin edition)*

Julian certainly pushes the limits of language in her fluid imagery. But she reminds us that experience of God is far wilder and richer than only *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.

The deeper we look at God ultimately words fail us and we stand before the Mystery of God. While speaking of God as Trinity will never begin to capture the fullness of God in God's self. But the purpose of speaking of God as three and one is not meant to be off putting but rather to remind us of the rich and varied ways we encounter the living God who loves us and gives us life.

**Amen.**