

Sermon – Trinity Sunday
Church of the Ascension, Rockville Centre – May 22, 2016

One of the things I love to do is to visit art galleries and especially the Met and MOMA. My favorite galleries contain the Impressionist and Abstract Expressionist paintings of the 19th and 20th centuries. The painter that has most captured my heart is Mark Rothko, the Russian American painter famous for those large “multiform” paintings. Early on Rothko drew on mythology as a source of inspiration and he believed that his art had the goal of relieving man’s spiritual emptiness. The later “multiform” paintings are built up in hundreds of coats of thin paint which gives the paintings an ineffable quality which takes my breath away. It was Rothko’s aim for the viewer to be “enveloped within” the painting, to feel a deep sense of intimacy. He recommended standing just 18” from the painting. He achieved his aim. I find it a transcendent spiritual experience to stand before one of his paintings, to absorb it all and let my soul become one with the painting.

When we have these experiences it can often be very hard to describe the exact nature of what we are feeling, what we are experiencing at the time. We can often struggle to find the right words to give justice to the powerful experience. In that struggle is the revelation that our vocabulary and our language place limits on us as we wrestle to explain the feelings we had in the experience. In order to explain the experience, we reach for a metaphor or an analogy to convey what the experience has been like for us. The language of our communication can in fact be very limiting. Even someone who majored in English, or who is good at a crossword, might still struggle to explain their feelings in a way we can all relate.

Mystery by its very definition is something that is hard to explain. The Doctrine of the Trinity is one such mystery and it has been very difficult for those that have come before us to explain. Today is Trinity Sunday, that first Sunday after Pentecost when we celebrate and remember the trinity of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today my sermon could be very short. A colleague of mine at the cathedral recounted a story from his childhood of hearing a Trinity Sunday sermon. The priest stood up and went to the pulpit and said, “Today is Trinity Sunday. The trinity is a mystery and by definition a mystery cannot be explained.” He then proceeded to start to recite the Creed. I laughed when I heard it but there is some truth here. The trinity is a mystery and a mystery is hard to explain. But let me unpack it a little for you so you can tell Fr. Kevin that I did my job.

The patristic fathers of the second century were the first theologians to wrestle with the concept that Jesus was of the same nature as God. God had been incarnate in the flesh of Jesus Christ. Arguments started over whether Jesus was the same as God or was just lower than God. The fathers needed to find a way to explain to the early Christians the inter-relationship between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Without a thorough resolution people would be forever torn and the resulting arguments would produce many heretical positions of untruth and possibly the dissolution of the church.

One of the fathers, a man named Irenaeus (c.202), was the first to really contemplate that the whole action of God in the world was for our salvation. God he stated was a personal God and

Jesus was God in human flesh, the most personal expression of God. He also stated that there was consistency in God's actions in the world. Jesus was not distinct from God but was of the same substance.

Tertullian, another patristic father from the third century, was a great creator of new words and significantly helped in the lead up to the great Councils of the 4th century by expanding the theological vocabulary to enable doctrines to be communicated and settled. He developed Latin words from the prevailing Greek language for the early church community. It was Tertullian who first used the word *trinitas* to describe what was understood as the three persons of the Godhead that shared the same substance.

Two other important words that he coined were *persona* and *substantia*. *Persona* was used to describe the three experiences of God – God, Jesus and the Advocate or Spirit. It is clear that this word developed into the English word *persons* of the trinity. The term *persona* literally means 'a mask.' Masks were used by the actors in Roman theater to convey different characters. So Tertullian coined the word to describe the different roles God played in the great drama of human redemption. There was one God who acted in a multiplicity of ways.

The second word was *substantia*. This word was introduced to convey the fundamental unity of the Godhead despite the inherent complexity of how God acted within human history. It expressed their foundational unity despite the outward appearance of diversity.

So the Doctrine of the Trinity was developed as "three persons in one substance." What then is the unifying substance? Well herein lies the mystery of God. God is spirit and Jesus contained this Godly spirit in his humanity. We now share in this Spirit of God as we too are filled with the Holy Spirit at our baptism as a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus that God would send a spirit to be an advocate and comforter for us. It is clear to me that the unifying substance is the Spirit of God. It is the same spirit that binds together the three *persona* of the Godhead, and now binds us into that Godhead as members of the body of Christ.

The patristic fathers wrestled with this concept in an environment of great uncertainty. The Doctrine of the Trinity was finally agreed at the Council of Nicaea in the late 4th century. The result of the intense exchange of theological ideas resulted in the creed of the church called the Nicene Creed. We will recite this ancient creed in a few minutes. Initially the creed did not acknowledge the Spirit but at the second great council in Constantinople, the insertion of the Spirit resulted in the creed we have today.

The Trinitarian statement of faith was settled and the theologians moved on to other issues. The concept was further examined and refined by Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century and by Thomas Aquinas in the 12th century. Thomas gave it much more theological examination and the resulting doctrine has largely shaped Trinitarian thinking ever since. Since then the Doctrine of the Trinity has found its way in to our faith language. Our prayer book for instance, modeled on the Cranmer prayer book of the 16th century is full of Trinitarian language. Do we though pay it much attention or do we just gloss over it as we pray? For most of my life I just glossed over it. No one really challenged me to think about it or to understand it really. It wasn't until seminary that I had to confront my own ignorance.

Therefore, an essential question for all of us is whether this Doctrine is important for us, whether it actually means anything to us that we should really go out of our way to understand it. Thomas Jefferson famously said that the Doctrine of the Trinity was “a metaphysical insanity” and differed from paganism only by being more unintelligible. We are a prayer book centered worshipping community so I feel we should understand the essence of the Trinity and how it relates and shapes us as Christians.

The essential link between the ancient understanding of the Trinity and our own understanding of it, lies in the relationships we have as persons within a community of faith. The Trinity is a community of three persons of one substance, and that substance is the spirit of God. The 4th century patristic fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa, used the word *perichoresis* to describe how the Trinity functioned. The essence of this word is the relatedness of the persons in community. The term conveys that the persons can maintain their individuality, whilst they share in the lives of the others, in this case the other two *personas*. The ‘community of being’ as represented by the Trinity is three persons, interconnected through spirit.

As a community of Christian faith I feel we are formed and bound together with the Trinitarian Godhead as our model. The three persons of the Godhead are not inward focused and remote but rather the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are outward focused and active in the world of our knowing, both within us and through us in the community.

We share in the same substance through the Holy Spirit, infused in us at baptism. The spirit of our creator God became the spirit of the incarnate God and at Pentecost, the spirit of the advocate God. All one in the same God, same *substantia* but acting in the world in different ways however for the same purpose, that being our salvation and the salvation of the world.

So for us we can try to come closer to the *trinitas*, to be enveloped within it, in the same way that we might come close to a Mark Rothko painting, to experience the intimacy of the relationship and the transcendence of spirit that we might feel. To come close to the trinity in our contemporary lives is to come close to each other in community. To stand with each other in suffering and joy and to share the same *substantia* that God shares with us, that empowers us to live the life God calls us into.

Amen