

Sermon – Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28: 16-20

Today we celebrate the Holy Trinity – God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is probably no greater example of the limitation of human vocabulary and ability than the efforts made by theologians and others since the third and fourth centuries to adequately describe the Holy Trinity. It remains a challenge for many, none more so than clergy preaching on Trinity Sunday. One of the most famous attempts at crafting a definition was made by Saint Augustine, the North African theologian from the 6th century who wrote an entire book called *On the Trinity*. It continues to be widely read by seminarians today.

There is a famous story about St Augustine, who when strolling along the Mediterranean shore of his north African homeland, noticed a small boy playing in the sand. The boy was scooping sea water up into his hands and dropping it into a hole he had dug in the hot sand. He did this again and again. Intrigued, Augustine went up to the boy and asked him what he was doing. The boy said that he was emptying the ocean by moving water into the small hole he had dug. Augustine was dismissive: how could such a vast body of water be contained in such a small hole, he asked the boy. The boy was equally dismissive retorting how was it possible that Augustine thought that he could contain the vast mystery of God in the mere words of a book!

Augustine simplified his point: “If you can get your mind around it, it cannot be God.” St Anselm of Canterbury, a monk, philosopher and theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury in the late 11th century, defined God as, “God is that, than which nothing greater can be conceived....” Trying to define God then seems almost impossible because the majesty and vastness of God is beyond our understanding. Thanks be to God that we have Jesus Christ who said of his Father – if you know me, you know my Father also.

And so it is that we need to see God in the three forms of the Holy Trinity – God the Father, before all time, God the Son, immanent and physically available to the earliest disciples, and God the Holy Spirit, a comforter and an advocate for us that resides in our very beings having being sealed within us at baptism.

The doctrine of the Trinity evolved out of the earliest efforts of the church fathers to clarify the identity of Jesus Christ. In theological terms we call this Christology. Who was Jesus in relation to God? Was Jesus the same as God or was Jesus just similar? Significant debate was had and predictably the arguments coalesced around two main ideas. The first, Jesus was said to be of the same substance as God. The second was that the creator God of the Old Testament was quite distinct from and inferior to the Redeemer God of the New Testament.

The matter was settled over the first four ecumenical councils called in the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries. The Nicene creed is the main document produced that defines the Holy Trinity. In the end the Trinity is a statement about our Christian God. The attempts to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity can be appreciated as trying to describe God faithfully, who while remaining

transcendent, also became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and then and now, indwells in believers in the form of the Holy Spirit.

Our Christian God is a personal, relatable God, not a philosophical construct or concept nor a carved image of one of many gods. The three 'persons' of the Trinity are at once one. God has appeared or been made known to humankind through the long arc of salvation history. God has sought nothing more than to be fully reconciled to his creation of humankind. Salvation is that reconciliation.

So why such an emphasis on trying to understand something that might always be out of our reach? The main reason I believe is to appreciate that our God has been present to creation through all of time, in different yet co-equal forms, and will be with us further until the end of time as we know it, and beyond. There is immense comfort in knowing and appreciating this.

The readings for today take us through that long span of time from our reading of the earliest description of how things came into being, all the way through to the risen Christ appearing to the disciples on the mountain in Galilee, where they were commissioned by Jesus to go out into the world to spread the good news of his life, death and resurrection.

In the two accounts of creation from Genesis chapters 1 and 2 we read the attempts by Moses, or his contemporaries to describe how the world came into being out of the chaos that existed beforehand. We know from science that the world is in fact billions of years old but of course Moses had no idea. The world they inhabited was largely a polytheistic world of multiple, often warring gods who fought each other for supremacy. Genesis is an attempt to show that one God was the true god and that God brought the world into being, and brought order out of chaos.

It was also the earliest attempts to describe God and how God acted in the world. Abraham represented the beginning of the salvation of the world when he followed God's invitation through faith alone. The post-Adam world is still to be perfected because our fallen nature means we are forever captured to our own self-interest, that is until we give our lives to Jesus Christ.

God in Jesus Christ came into the world to deepen God's relationship with humankind. God emptied himself of his divinity and took on the fullness of mankind, when he was born to Mary. God appeared amongst those earliest people in human flesh and grew into his ministry over his thirty odd years of life. It is to his ministry that we are to be most grateful because the teachings that he gave have survived the attempts of the world to eradicate them and turn back toward self-interest through a manipulation of the world order.

Jesus was at pains to teach his disciples and followers that all of God's creation in humankind was equal and all of God's creation was to treat each other justly, lovingly and mercifully. Jesus taught as we all know so well that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our

God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind. And the second commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The commissioning of the disciples after his death was the start of every Christians outreach to other people to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Each and every Christian was to be accompanied on their mission by the Holy Spirit, sent by God to each one of us to reside in our souls and to shepherd us through life's winding path.

2,000 years later we still have to keep at the work given to us because as soon as we rest, the dark forces of life, those that would turn everything good away in the name of self-interest, crowd into life and choke off hope and justice. Jesus died on the cross on Calvary because he exemplified standing up for what was true and right. He paid with his life because the authorities took his teaching as a threat to their own power.

The recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Aumaud Arbery and now we add Manuel Ellis to that very sad list, has cast an immense spotlight on injustice, entrenched inequality and racism in this country all of which is perpetuated by individuals but more importantly by our institutions and the culture of racist behavior that is deeply embedded in institutional culture.

I don't pretend to fully understand or appreciate how ingrained this racism is within American culture. I am trying to educate myself about the history of slavery, the civil war, voter suppression over the last century or so and by listening to your stories, and the stories of others who tell firsthand of the injustice perpetrated on you by the systems in which we live, work and worship.

Before I arrived in the United States in 2011 I don't think I had ever heard of the term "white privilege." I've heard it plenty since arriving and now appreciate the way I live with white privilege because of the color of my skin, my name, accent and so on. Over the past few years I have had to own this and reflect on how it exists within me.

Know that I know what 'white privilege' is and how it accompanies me in my life, I can either pay attention to it and play on it for my own benefit, or I can deepen my awareness of my own learnt and inherited racial biases and try to overcome them at every opportunity. This means living in a conscious state of self-examination and corrective behavior.

This really is how the life of a Christian should go. For being a Christian means deepening our understanding of our fallen human nature and taking steps to correct it following the teachings of Jesus Christ.

God saw in the fallen world the need for an intervention, the need for God to break into the world, in human form, to relate to God's creation and to lead change. All followers of Jesus Christ are agents of change and we are all called to use the gifts given to us by God, through the one and same Holy Spirit, to change ourselves first, and then to change the communities and world in which we live.

So the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, was sent for this reason. God in spirit form to accompany us as we move out into the world and change what we can for the better. Even though in different ways we each struggle with this immense task, we can take comfort that Jesus foresaw our struggles, the injustices that would be perpetrated against Christians, the injustice of misuse of institutional power, the injustice of racism and shunning and depowering the 'other,' often those in the minority. Despite the power of racism and the injustice of misused power, Jesus still called for us to love our neighbors as we would love ourselves.

So God, embodied in the Holy Trinity spans the arc of time, the arc of salvation history. One and the same God, in three persons or forms, but of the one substance. Our scripture carries this arc through to the post resurrection appearances of Jesus and the establishment of the first churches, the first gatherings of the body of Christ. From then on it is carried forward in our own experiences and stories.

Hundreds of thousands, probably millions of Christians have been martyred for their faith and for the ministry work they felt called to do in all parts of the world. Many, many people of color, and their white supporters died in the horror of lynchings and the long fight for civil rights that continues today. Many have died defending love, justice, grace and mercy.

We are entering a deeper time of trial this year. The fragility of humankind has been laid bare by the pandemic, and the fragility of our system of government and government policy on healthcare, justice and the environment has been laid bare, and now the blatant killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Manuel Ellis, demonstrated by police officers, people invested with significant power by our communities, having lost sight of George, Breonna and Manuel's humanity, each created in the image of God.

God as the Holy Trinity has experienced the full violence perpetrated on humankind in the death of Jesus. But that did not stop God honoring Jesus' promise to send us the Holy Spirit to ensure we would not be left alone in this world.

So as we remember this Sunday the blessings of the Holy Trinity, may we remember why God send Jesus and the Holy Spirit to us. That is so that we might be fully reconciled to our creator so that we might then change the world for the better. Now is the time for renewed action. Now is the time we rise up again and take another big step toward righting the wrongs of the past with hearts of compassion, love and mercy powered on by the grace of God, freely given to all.

Amen