

Trinity Sunday

WNMC, Matins
May 27, 2018

Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29:1-4, 10-11; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Verse for Reflection: “When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:15-17).

Hymn of Response: Hymnal #492, “God of Eve and God of Mary”

Introduction:

Today is Trinity Sunday, traditionally celebrated by the church on the Sunday after Pentecost. It is one of the few celebrations of the Christian calendar that commemorates a doctrine, rather than a person or an event.

The doctrine of the Trinity has a most fascinating and controversial history. And I realize that its late formulation amidst the Arian controversy and its association with political power and the name of Constantine has caused many to view the doctrine with some skepticism.

This skepticism has no doubt been heightened under the influence of French postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault who has famously suggested that all knowledge is merely a construction of power. The problem with this generalization, is that Foucault’s own analysis of knowledge must then itself be merely a power construct, and hence we should be skeptical of his claims as well. The reduction of knowledge to power is really self-defeating. Of course, knowledge claims cannot be entirely divorced from considerations of power, but it is a mistake to say knowledge claims are only power constructs.

So, a better way to deal with the colourful history of the doctrine of the Trinity, is to search for the truth, and do so with care and openness. Is the Christian God best described as one in essence but distinct in three persons, as the Nicene Creed assumes? I want to suggest that if we had only our lectionary readings to draw on, we already would have significant reason to believe in the Trinity.

My approach this morning will be to briefly highlight what our readings say about each person of the Trinity, and then say a little about what this has meant for me. It has been well said that all teaching and preaching and writing is in part autobiography, and so I want to be more explicit about this in my homily.

God, the Father:

All of our readings refer to God, though using differing images. The Psalmist and Isaiah both highlight the splendour and majesty and holiness of God. Yet, in each case you also have a description of God trying to bridge the gap between himself and his people. Our gospel reading too describes God as loving the people of this world so much that he sent his Son into the world. Paul in the beginning of Romans 8 (vs. 3) uses similar language

and then describes us as children of God who affectionately refer to God as “Abba, Father” (vs. 15).

My father died of cancer when I was only 17 years old. My grandfather, Jacob Thiessen, a preacher, was at my father’s bedside when he died. And I remember grandfather giving us grandchildren a little sermon during this initial time of grieving. He reminded us that the bible often talks of God as a father who is especially concerned about the widow and the fatherless. Psalm 68:5, for example, describes God as “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows.”

I have often been reminded of these verses as I have had to live most of my life without an earthly father. But I still have a heavenly Father, and what a consolation that has been.

I would like to encourage us not to shy away from describing God as Father. I realize that there are other images of God found in the bible, and I certainly want to affirm all of them. But let’s remember the fatherless in our congregation. They need to be reminded that God is a Father to them. And they are not alone. There are many who are suffering from a memory of a father who was not ideal, who may even have been abusive. They too can still understand, and they need the image of a heavenly father who is perfect, and who continues to love them despite the painful memories of their earthly father.

I am thankful that in our matins services, we always sing the Lord’s prayer which begins with “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

God, the Son:

I have already mentioned that both Paul and our gospel reading in John, talk about God sending his Son into the world. Nicodemus was quite prepared to acknowledge Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God” (John 3:2). But in the difficult conversation that ensues, Jesus wants to go further than this, claiming to be descended from heaven, and in fact implying that he is the very Son of God (vss. 13-17). Paul in Romans 8 is quite indiscriminate in talking about God or Christ, as though these are interchangeable concepts (Rom 8:9-10, 16-17).

It was during my fourth year of studies at the University of Saskatchewan that I experienced a crisis of faith. My studies in science and the school of logical positivism in philosophy, were making it increasingly difficult for me to hold on to my Christian beliefs. Isn’t talk about a God whom you cannot see, meaningless? I wasn’t finding answers to this question and so was beginning to wonder whether intellectual integrity demanded a rejection of the Christian faith with which I had grown up.

The local chapter of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship held a Christian mission on campus that year (1966), and the main speaker for this mission was John W. Montgomery, an historian, Lutheran theologian, and Christian apologist. He was also invited to lecture in one of my philosophy classes and I was impressed with his clear reasoning. I asked if I could meet with him to discuss my doubts and also a paper I had

prepared that attempted to deal with my doubts.

Montgomery was most encouraging, and he also addressed my doubts concerning the verifiability of the Christian faith, highlighting the significance of the Word becoming flesh (John 1:1-11). God entered space and time in the person of Jesus Christ. That is why in our gospel reading, Jesus encourages us to believe about heavenly things on the basis of what is transpiring here on earth (John 3:12-13).

Over the years my appreciation of the significance of the Incarnation as the foundation of the Christian faith has only increased. For many people, especially philosophers, this foundation might seem rather flimsy, based as it is on contingent historical fact. But Paul insists that if Jesus was not the Son of God, and if Christ had not been raised from the dead, then “our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (I Cor. 15:14).

It is this historical event that continues to be the bedrock of my Christian faith. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus provide empirical justification for believing in God’s existence. Of course there are additional philosophical, historical and hermeneutical issues that need to be addressed here, and I have had a lot of fun exploring these issues over the course of my career. But I remain convinced that Jesus was and is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity.

God, the Holy Spirit:

I move on to a consideration of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Psalm 29 ascribes glory to the LORD, and reminiscent of the creation story, the voice of the LORD, or the spirit of the LORD, hovered over the waters as we read in verse 3. In our reading from John 3, we find Nicodemus confronted with the challenge of understanding what Jesus meant when he said that “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (vss. 2, 5). All three persons of the Trinity are mentioned in this well known and well-loved chapter of John.

Similarly in our reading from Romans 8. Here, the Spirit is connected to our very human battle with our sinful nature, but this Spirit also bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, as we cry “Abba, Father” (vss. 13, 15-16). And as already mentioned, throughout this chapter, the Spirit, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ are used interchangeably (vss. 9-10, 16-17).

There is another personal experience I would like to describe, which relates to the third person of the Trinity—God, the Holy Spirit. I’m not entirely sure when I had this experience, but I believe it occurred during my first difficult year at the university after my father died. It was during this time that I had what I can only describe as a mystical experience. Indeed, I may even have spoken in tongues.

I was in the home of an IVCF staff member, and must have been sharing the emotional turmoil I was going through. We all knelt down to pray—and I kept on praying. I recall repeating the name of “Jesus” over and over again. I was so absorbed in prayer that eventually my hosts had to gently intervene, because they had to go to

another appointment. While in this trance-like state, I experienced an overwhelming sense of peace. God's Spirit, I am sure, was meeting some deeply felt needs of mine at the time. This experience has served to temper my criticisms of the charismatic movement in Christianity.

I could go on to describe a more recent experience of the reassuring presence of the Holy Spirit carrying me through a 2-year bout of anxiety and depression. So, I believe in the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

I believe in the Trinity. My commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity is not only based on my own experiences, but also on Scripture, and on church tradition.

We need the doctrine of the Trinity today. We cannot fully understand it, but we must affirm even that which we don't fully understand. Our minds are after all rather finite.

So, I am thankful that in our matins liturgy, we affirm the Trinity several times each Sunday. "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen"

Elmer Thiessen