

Trinity

I take as my text today the Collect for Trinity Sunday:

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us stedfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities....

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.”

Today, as we celebrate the *Feast of the Holy Trinity*, we are doing something that is peculiar to Anglicanism, going back to St. Thomas Becket who directed the regular observance of **Trinity Sunday** throughout the realm.

In recent times, the Roman Church and others have taken to numbering the Sundays following Pentecost until Advent as “Ordinary Time,” while we Anglicans continue to number the Sundays from Trinity until Advent as Sundays in the Season of Trinity.

Yes, we, Anglicans, are a stubborn lot and stick to a tradition that typically reflects our English religious heritage and divides the liturgical calendar into two periods: **Advent to Pentecost** during which we observe the historical Christ, and **Trinity to Advent** as a period of instruction on our *Catholic Faith*.

For several Sundays, now, we have been discussing the Godhead, focusing on God as Divine Love, not only that God **IS** Love but that it is Divine Love that binds the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three Persons in one Nature — inseparable yet distinguishable — and it is that Divine Love which binds us and all of his Creation to him.

So, we come to **Trinity Sunday**, and while the Epistle and Gospel appointed for this Sunday are more closely associated with Pentecost, the Collect brings home a truth that has challenged the Church Fathers and subsequent theologians since the turn of the first century.

Indeed, what we are celebrating today, with the *Feast of the Trinity*, is the ultimate self-revelation of God and his redemptive purposes. He is revealed to us as a conscious, intelligent, purposeful life, a reality that is found in the mutual love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the Three Persons of the Godhead, distinguishable as Persons, yet indistinguishable as essence, that for the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century, such as St. Basil, was not abstract but a concrete reality.

What we take for granted as the *Doctrine of the Trinity* was hammered out over several centuries from differing conceptions of the Godhead, many of which were declared heretical, such as Arianism.

Undoubtedly, what God has revealed is far beyond human comprehension, yet it has been man's endeavor to study and classify God as if he were a specimen in a laboratory.

From the study of Holy Scripture, we find that God is One while at the same time three Persons. That is the mystery of the **Holy Trinity**: the Unity of the Trinity, three persons co-equal in all things, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

“The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and yet they are not three Gods, but one God”....co-equal yet one God; co-eternal; of one substance. There is no time when God was not; there is no beginning and there is no end.

This is the *Doctrine of the Trinity*. This is the doctrine taught by the Church and proved by Holy Scripture. It is a mystery beyond our human reason to comprehend, only to accept.

This is a lot to take in; but first, in our journey of Faith, we must accept that God is spirit and has no bodily form. We cannot touch Him with our hands or see Him with our eyes.

Moreover, God is Self-existent, that is, God is without creation and from all eternity while we are His Creation. He has no beginning nor ending; He Is. With God, there is no past nor future but an eternal present.

God is Holy, that is, He is the essence of Goodness. It is that “Goodness” that enables us to love and obey Him.

God is Almighty in that He can do whatever He pleases, except sin. He cannot sin because He is perfect.

God is Omnipresent, that is, He is in everything, in all and through all, and from Him nothing is hid.

God is Love; Love is the very being of God. As God never changes, so He is and has ever been love.

Accepting that God is love, infinite love, is essential; it is basic to accepting that He is not, and never was, alone. From all eternity He is three persons in one God. This we can accept knowing that love needs an object upon which to spend itself. If God were solitary He would be imperfect.

But God is perfect; therefore, within God perfect love exists in the divine society of the **Trinity**.

In the words of Vernon Staley, in his book *The Catholic Religion*:

The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, with perfect and eternal love; and Both love the Spirit, who is the eternal bond of love between the Father and the Son.

This is the revelation that God is Love, and it is this revelation that prepares the reason or mind for the revelation of the mystery of the **Holy Trinity**.

The question at this point is not do we understand all this but do we accept the mystery of the **Holy Trinity**?

One of the difficulties, even a stumbling block, in accepting God's Self-revelation is our own language.

In the context of the Trinity, the word *Person* does not mean "Individual." The word *Person* came to us through a Latin translation of the Greek *hypostasis*. The Latin was *Persona* and meant originally a "mask" and is used in a technical sense.

Another word, or concept, is *homoousian*: much debate in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries centered around this word, *homoousian*, which has been translated from the Greek as "substance" or "essence."

There was tremendous debate, as reflected in the writings of those centuries and reports from the oecumenical councils, in particular the *Council of Nicea* in 325, from which was derived the **Nicene Creed** and much of the defining language of the Godhead.

By 362, St. Athanasius, who was a leading voice in the defining of the Faith, presided over the *Synod of Alexandria* where significant progress was made in sorting out the issues related to the Incarnation that we take for granted today, the particulars of the **Word** taking upon Himself our flesh to be born of the **Virgin Mary**.

The evidence from Scripture concerning the nature of the Godhead led to the Trinitarian definition but the way had to be cleared of any misconceptions that would lead to theism, or a belief that God was actually three gods in one instead of three Persons in One God.

What may have been perfectly clear to the Apostles, when expressed in language through the Gospels and Epistles, became for those who followed a veritable mystery to be sorted out. The clues were there in the Scriptures but how to express it; how to avoid heresies that would be inevitable during a process that would take several centuries.

While such statements as when Jesus said “I and the Father are One,” appear simple on the surface, they provoked a complexity of thinking that involved even the philosophical processes of Aristotle and Plato.

As much difficulty as the **Church Fathers** and early theologians had in seeking the proper language to express what has been revealed of the Godhead through Scripture, we have perhaps a greater difficulty with our own language to fully express the exact meaning of the original Greek, even the Latin translations.

Quite often, understanding the original language leads us to a more ready acceptance of what is revealed to us through Scripture.

Now, by no means is this a comprehensive look at the ***Doctrine of the Holy Trinity***. Perhaps, though, it is a reasonable beginning.

It is a doctrine that is not contrary to reason but beyond human reason.

Our being able to understand the nature of God as defined in our doctrine is not so important. God exists as undivided **substance** in divided **Persons** we recognize as the **Trinity**. It is a paradox and we are reminded by St. Paul in his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians:

For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Perhaps, one of the comforts of accepting the **Trinity** is the revealing through it of the perfect-ness of God's Love. How wonderful is His Love, not just within the Godhead, but in and through all of His Creation, as expressed so emphatically in the sending of His Son Jesus Christ to be a propitiation for the sins of the world, and to be our Advocate with the Father; and in the sending the Holy Spirit to be our Comforter and Guide.

We are baptized into the family of God in the Name of the **Trinity**, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and we are blessed throughout our lives in the Name of the **Trinity**, of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and when we are called home, we are received lovingly by the **Holy Trinity**, our Heavenly Father who created us, Jesus Christ His Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us.

Perhaps, one of the best definitions of our *Doctrine of the Trinity* can be found in the *Athanasian Creed*. Though it carries the name of St. Athanasius, it was written after his death but certainly reflects his influence.

While the *Athanasian Creed* is not contained in our Book of Common Prayer, nevertheless, it is one of the three creeds accepted by the Anglican Church and well worth reading, more than once or twice.

From the earliest days, Christians have sought to better understand the Faith given to the Church by our Lord and Saviour. We have sought even to understand God Himself as revealed through Holy Scripture.

But we are limited by our very nature as created beings, bound by time and space, so that we will always be seeking to understand the mysteries of God, of heavenly things, all of which will be revealed to us when we have ourselves departed from the bounds of this earthly life, and return to Him Who created us, redeemed us, and inspires us: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.