

Trinity Sunday

May 30, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.”

Look at us! All here at church. Does it feel ok?

I am sure someone out there is upset that we are requiring vaccines to attend church in person. I am sorry if that includes you. I haven't heard anything besides “I wouldn't come unless they were required,” but I am sensitive to that fact that it is not without consequence. We decided to prioritize our children and others who are unable to be vaccinated yet. Having everyone else in the room vaccinated makes it safer for them, and there isn't really much more to say about that. If you do have questions, I would be happy to speak with you, and I am happy to bring communion to you at home!

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day specially dedicated to our doctrine of the Triune nature of God. It is not as fun a feast as Pentecost, and the Trinity is some complicated theology so I usually give a pretty set Trinity Sunday sermon. Trinity Sunday and Christmas morning's sermons are my only two repeating homilies. On Christmas I preach that “Jesus is the present that no one actually wants but everyone actually needs.” Maybe a bit much for Christmas morning but for the six of us who attend it works. On Trinity Sunday I usually read The Creed of St Athanasius and give minimal commentary. It sort of speaks for itself. We did it last year, remember?

The Creed of St. Athanasius is quite literally in the small print at the back of the BCP. It is one of our formal creeds, but we don't use it liturgically like its more prominent cousins the Nicene and Apostles creeds. This one wasn't exactly written by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, but rather has its roots in that good saint's thinking (and that of St. Augustine's) and developed gradually between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. What does it say? Well, the form and the content of the Creed speak in all sorts of ways to the ineffability of God.

“...the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and  
Trinity in Unity,

neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another  
of the Holy Ghost.”

The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy  
Ghost

Incomprehensible...”

And so on for another 522 words. It is worth reading once a year.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not Scriptural. That was the Unitarian’s main argument against Trinitarian theology. (Unitarians don’t appreciate the irony that their roots are as biblical literalists). The Trinity is not explicitly defined by Jesus, Peter or Paul, or any of the four evangelists. It is hinted at. Seeds are sown in our Holy texts, but our knowledge of the nature of God, like life itself, evolves, has evolved, continues to evolve; the revelation is not sealed.

All four pieces of scripture in the Propers for Trinity Sunday contain the seeds of Trinitarian theology, the main thrust of the whole doctrine being ineffability. Ineffable means to be too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words; not to be uttered. The doctrine of the Trinity is intimated in the inapprehendability of God that we see in scripture.

Like in Isaiah, the hem of God’s robe fills the Temple, the seraphs call back and forth, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Can you imagine that scene? Not just some CGI – SciFi version, but for real... What a fantastic vision.

From the psalmist we hear, “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name; \* worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” “The beauty of holiness?” I’ve got an inkling of what that means, but it is just beyond the reach of reason.

In Romans St. Paul teaches, “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—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” We have to sit with those Pauline twists and turns for a long time sometimes for them to make sense..

And St. John the Evangelist gives us one of the mystery writings for the ages, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

So what do those passages have to do with the meaning we make when we encounter God? What does the beauty of holiness have to do with Athanasius’ formulation of Jesus as “God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world; Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting...” What’s that got to do with that? That is an excellent, perpetual, and difficult question to answer.

Now don't worry, I am not extolling anti-intellectualism when it comes to our lives of faith! Ours, Anglicanism's, is a learned ministry. For better or for worse I studied at Harvard Divinity School; I have four years of explanations as to why obscure, inaccessible, and esoteric philosophical and theological nuances in our thought and practice matter, deeply, and why, even to our cultured despisers! While we can't think ourselves to God, relinquishing our God given gifts of reason and discernment is an almost sure path to ignorance and intolerance and thus, ruin.

At the very same time, faith, our experience of faith in our minds, experiences of Beauty and Holiness, Truth and Goodness, of Consolation and Salvation, of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, they mature into fullness in our hearts and spirits and bodies... you feel the wash of emotion with a beautiful vista of the creation; your innards are warmed with affection for someone you love; tears well up in joy for the joy of another. That is faith happening. The doctrines are *about* that experience, but are very different than the experience itself.

Leonardo Boff is a prominent Franciscan priest and theologian from Brazil. He was one of the pioneers of liberation theology, Latin America's great gift to Christendom. Born in the favelas, slums, battlefields and torture chambers of 1980s Central and South America, liberation theology unveils the truth of, among other things, God's preferential option for the poor. That idea is the taking of Jesus' teaching that the first will be last and the last will be first with deadly seriousness (particularly for those of us who are not last right now). One of his contemporaries was Dom Helder Câmara, Archbishop of Brazil, who is famously quoted saying, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." Our nation's track record down there is abysmal.

Part of Fr. Boff's enduring genius is that yes, he was a theologian working in the academy, but he took his Franciscan roots to heart and his heart was with the people, his people. And his people were poverty stricken, illiterate, oppressed, scared, conscripted, and colonized. The faith *he* understood in one way, and was helpful for some of us, he knew could also be understood in other ways, in ways that were more helpful to others. This dichotomy he described as faith on one hand, and explication of faith on the other.

In the introduction to his 1986 book *Trinity and Society*, a solid academic treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity, he begins, "An encounter with the divine Mystery lies at the root of all religious doctrine. This encounter evokes a deep experience embracing all our humanity: emotions, reason, will, desire, and heart. The first reaction, an expression of pleasure, is praise, worship and

proclamation. After that comes the task of appropriating and translating this experience-encounter, the task of devout reasoning. This is the stage at which doctrines and creeds come into being.”

Our Holy Scriptures, the readings we hear today for example, they are the record of a people’s (*our* people’s) encounter with God. Boff wrote, “In the first place came the original experience: the first disciples lived with Jesus, saw how he prayed, how he spoke to God, how he preached, how he treated people, particularly the poor, how he faced up to conflict, how he suffered and died and rose again; they also saw what happened in the community that believed in him, especially after Pentecost. With joy in their prayers and simplicity in their preaching, they proclaimed the Father, Son and Holy Spirit... Later Christians began to think about this experience and to translate this proclamation into formula. This gave rise to the classical expression of the doctrine of the Trinity: one God in three Persons, or one nature and three hypostases, or three Lovers and a single love, or three Subjects and a single substance...”

So St. Athanasius et al offer us an explication of faith. An explication is a process of analyzing and developing an idea or principal in detail. It exists in line with, complimenting the experience of faith, but it is separate, it appeals to different parts of different people and for a whole lot of different reasons.

So where does that leave us today, Trinity Sunday, 2021, the first time we’ve pulled out all of the stops and a bunch of us are back together in person, vaxes in, masks off, Mass on? What does this doctrine mean to you? What is your experience of God in this moment? How does anything I or the good St. Athanasius or Fr. Boff have said informed your faith?

For me, faith and the explication of faith, at least when it comes to the Trinity, aren’t that far off. Scripture, certainly our scripture today, speaks to how indescribable God is, (or at least that God is so fantastic as to defy reason). And God needs to be indescribable, for being able to describe something is the first step towards domestication, and if God is anything, God is beyond domestication (though we have tried)! That has been my experience of God, indescribable, and that has also been one of the most compelling explications of God as well, for me, at least. That God is unknowable, in a clear, rational way, reflected in the prohibition of Graven Images in the 10 commandments.

And there is the Reality of God, explicated in scripture and experienced in gathering like we are right now, like we are about to around the table of the Lord, like we do in intimate conversation, bedside visits, in the love of two people, or a family, or a community... It is the seraphs singing in perfect harmony back and forth in the presence of, for the joy of God. It is worshipping the Lord

in the beauty of holiness, worship is among the most intimate connection we humans are capable of. Intimate in terms of those with whom we share worship and of course with the subject of our worship. Children, heirs, Abba! Father! Cries Paul. “For God so loved the world...” the faith and the explication of the faith, our experience and understanding of God, in the end, is the same as our experience and understanding, our faith and explication of faith in love. Our model of God, our doctrine, is much like our experience of God. And what is that experience? Love. If I were theologically hair-splitting, I’d put it all under the heading of relationship. (Love being the most right and perfect form of relationship). All that we read today, all that we encounter in our lives of faith, all we strive for, be it to be in union with God, to join a choir singing in time and in tune, or being one of many gathered together around a real altar after more than a year in the digital wilderness.

The God we encounter, the God we dream about, the God we try to explain (to ourselves or to others), the God we worship and recite Creeds about, and commune with through the special sacramental offices of the Church, is all about relationship, is relationship, is Love with a big L. And whatever it takes, be it doctrinal formulations, epic personal experiences, or gentle, gradual, intimacy that grows week after week, month after month, year after year in the presence of each other and the holy around this very table... I am glad to be back here with you.

AMEN.