

Pentecost C - Trinity Sunday - 30 May 2010  
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15  
Jim Stockton

"God is one God, yet [God] exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Clearly this is a mystery." So writes author and theologian C. Stephan Evans in his book, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*. Evans continues, "[Humanity] cannot fathom such a being. Perhaps with the help of various analogies we can get a vague sense of what such a being must be like and why we cannot fully understand it."

Accurately or not, the Episcopal Church is characterized, as less concerned than are other denominations with doctrine. This makes it all the more important to note that the doctrine of the Trinity is very much a teaching that the Episcopal Church holds as absolutely central to Christian faith. That God is triune is a defining teaching of Christianity. I suggest, it is an insight into the nature of God that is uniquely Christian. This is not an invitation for Christians to hold forth this doctrine as means of a sort of spiritual or religious competition with other world-views.

Rather, I think the Trinity is something that God entrusts to people as precious and profound. It is something for us to care *for* as well as care *about* it. And if the Trinity is the mystery that I think it is, perhaps it is important that we celebrate it on a day upon which we celebrate also such human mysteries as duty, courage, and sacrifice; because we celebrate this doctrine today not only as an insight into God; but also as an insight into ourselves.

To the degree that it is helpful, I offer an analogy: a boiling teapot, a glass of water, and an ice-cube; all are different things, yet all are composed of the same substance, di-hydrogen oxide, H<sub>2</sub>O. Orthodoxy describes God in a similar way. God is one substance in three persons. God the Father is distinct from the God the Son, who is also distinct from God the Holy Spirit. Yet none of these is God in part, but each is God in full.

This may sound simple. It may sound needlessly complicated. It may even sound irrelevant. So, it is important to reinforce here the fact that the Episcopal Church does not reject someone because they question the meaning or importance of this doctrine. The Church does, though, and I think rightly so, urge people to be willing to

accept the proposition that the teaching is important, even if they do not quite understand why.

Is it possible that you and I can find wisdom enough to understand some of the importance to us of this unique mystery known as the Trinity? 'Wisdom calls,' says the scripture; 'Understanding raises her voice.' If nothing else, the passage from the Book of Proverbs affirms God's blessing upon humanity's pursuit of knowledge and understanding. It also, though, gives insight into the nature of God. Wisdom is with God before God ever begins creating anything. Before God ever creates even an empty void where the universe can have space enough to exist, Wisdom is with God. And when God does set to work creating heavens above and earth and sea below, Wisdom is the 'master-worker,' as the scripture describes it, bringing all this into being and celebrating it all with God.

Here is the ancient struggle, then, of the people of God to understand God, in some way that rings true to their experience with God, and at the same time does not compromise other knowledge and experience of God that is theirs already. God is one God. The people have learned this. In that classic struggle to be free, God showed up as God for the people of Israel and as God over the people of Egypt as well. There is not a god for this group over there or for that nation over there. There is not a deity of the river valley and a different deity for the desert wastes. God is sovereign over all of it.

And this tells people something about themselves. Wherever they are, whether by choice or otherwise, they are never beyond the knowledge and reach of God. Maybe it is a warning: 'God will always find us.' Or maybe it is a source of comfort and reassurance: 'God will always find us.' At the same time, humanity's experience of God is more than can be contained in the insight that 'God is one.' Yes, God is Creator while humanity is but creation; yes, God is Almighty while humanity knows impotence as least as well as it knows success; yes God's presence is everywhere, while humanity is often lost to itself or some portion of humanity is completely overlooking another.

Yet, the many characteristics of God that completely distinguish humanity from God and God from

humanity, somehow do not separate humanity from God; in fact, they seem unable to do so. As different and distinct as God is from you and me and from the people around us, yet, God is known to us; we meet God, we experience God, and we discover that when we express the 'other-ness' of God we simply cannot adequately represent all that the wisdom of our souls and minds and bodies understands of God.

Wisdom personified is an expression of the insight that God is more than humanity can say when all that people can say is, 'God is One.' Wisdom personified is a tenuous expression of the insight that God is more than humanity can say when all that people can say is, 'God is He.' Wisdom personified is a courageous expression of the precious insight that God is simply more than people can say.

And people may find themselves, momentarily at least, simply speechless. There is a reason that the observance of Memorial Day involves a moment of silence. The more one ponders it, the more one realizes that respect for fallen warriors demands it; honor for their sacrifice compels it. The more one ponders the occasion, the more one realizes that the complex dynamic of heroic bravery on the one hand and of human failure on the other hand that required it imposes upon us all the conviction that even with all that is said, written, and sung, there simply are few words fit to speak around their memory beyond simply 'Thank you,' and, 'I'm sorry.'

As dryly academic or verbally nonsensical or conceptually illogical, may be the Trinitarian expression of God that we celebrate today, the experience of God behind it is one that continues to elicit both silence and speech, essay and song in attempts to express it albeit in some imperfect way. 'Christ Jesus is the mediator of grace,' writes the apostle Paul; 'thus, we have peace with God.' 'In addition, we have the Love of God within us put there by the Spirit that God has given to us.' In a very brief passage, the apostle Paul references each of the three Persons of the Trinity.

Not so systematically, Paul tries to describe how the relationship of each to the other is working for the blessing of the Christians in Rome and so for all Christians in general. And the truth is that Paul is not emphasizing a systematic understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; so

if the dynamics are less than crystal clear, that's okay. Paul's emphasis is upon the experience of God's grace, of God's peace, of the assurance that even in the midst of suffering and hard times, God's love for us is deep within us.

If this moves us to appreciation in words and beyond them, then so be it. If we are moved to the insight that the expression of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer describes God rightly, yet leaves much about God unsaid, then so be it. If, as Jesus says to his disciples, there is much for us yet to hear from him, much to hear from God the Father, much to hear through God the Holy Spirit, then maybe we are moved to the insight that the expression of God as Source of all being, Incarnate Word, and Sacred Inspiration describes God well; yet there remains much more about God that remains unspoken.

It is a worthy thing today and tomorrow to honor the sacrificial examples of people's determination not to be defined by humanity's failures, but instead to express the most noble traits of what it is to be truly and extraordinarily human. I suggest that the doctrine of the Trinity is a memorial of sorts that God entrusts to us; a memorial and reminder that just as there is more to the mystery of God than we can fully express, so also there is more of God that finds expression through the mystery of you and me. All different, yet all of the substance of God: better than through any analogy, we find here our gathering here together a very great sense of what God is like.

To paraphrase theologian Stephen Evans, "God is one God, yet [God] exists as [Trinity]. Clearly this is a mystery." To which I will add that, whatever terms we use to describe ourselves, or whatever terms other may use to define us, or to define or confine those around us, God has more to say to us, more to say about us, more to say through us, than we can yet understand. The mystery of God is intimately woven into the mystery that is you, the mystery that is me, the mystery that is all of us together. Clearly, God is setting us free.

To the glory and by the grace of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.