

Yr. C, Trinity Sunday
June 3, 2007
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1374 words

Lessons:
Psalm 29
Isaiah 6:1-8
Revelation 4:1-11
John 16:(5-11) 12-15

I speak to you in the name of our God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This first Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost is known as Trinity Sunday. You can tell it is Trinity Sunday all over the Episcopal Church because seasoned priests everywhere cheerfully yield their pulpits to eager, recently-trained priests (or even seminarians-in-training) who grasp for just the right words to explain the mystery of the trinity.

They are preaching to congregations who are generally content to simply proclaim the mystery of the Trinity as spelled out in the Nicene Creed, and get on with the Liturgy of the Table. But there stands the preacher—as determined as ever—as if to say, “No Trinity. No Eucharist.”

And you know what? It’s true! No trinity. No Eucharist.

Let’s begin by looking at our lessons. Did you notice anything special about the lessons from the prophet Isaiah and from the Revelation to John? They are both exquisite visions. Isaiah begins by writing, “In the year King Uzziah died, I *saw*...”¹ He goes on to describe in elaborate detail an experience of the Sanctus, the Holy.

As worshippers, we believe this is important and so we include it near the beginning of every celebration of Holy Eucharist at the Liturgy of the Table: “Holy, Holy, Holy; Lord God of Hosts: Heaven and earth are full of your glory.”²

Isaiah writes that the thresholds shook, and our thresholds would shake too if we appropriately prostrated ourselves face down before this three-times holy creator, redeemer and sustainer of all heaven and earth. When we behold the holiness of this triune God, there is but one response: we bow down before the Lord. No trinity. No Eucharist.

Isaiah is not the only one to receive the gift of seeing. In today’s reading from the apocalypse, John of Patmos writes, “After this, I *looked* and there in heaven a door stood open.”³ Once again, the lesson describes a vision—something that could be seen. And as awe-inspiring as this vision was, John experienced it as an invitation to enter and participate in the worship.

Once again, we get the Sanctus, whose origins belong to Isaiah, yet we move from being prostrate to gathering with prophets, apostles, martyrs, with one another, and with all the company of heaven...and this is really important—we gather around our God who is at the center of our common life.

The One who creates, redeems and sustains this holy...holy...holy Communion of saints, living *and* dead, is the center of our eternal worship. No trinity. No Eucharist.

¹ Isaiah 6:1

² Isaiah 6:3

³ Revelation 4:1

And then we have the Gospel, which at one level, moves in an entirely different direction. Jesus is going *away*, and is preparing the apostles to receive the Holy Spirit. The apostles' faith is about to undergo a radical transformation from what they can see—Jesus—to what is unseen (but heard), the Spirit of Truth. No more exquisite visions of calmed storms, the blind gaining sight, the deaf starting to hear, the lame leaping for joy, and dead being raised to new life. Visions? No. Guidance? Yes.

In today's Gospel lesson, Christ introduces us to the 3rd Person of the Trinity, even pointing out that it is to our advantage that the *unseen* Advocate will take over as our immediate guide. And so we have the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. With the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.⁴ And He acts in and through the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

Much of the time you and I are too afraid, too blind or too deaf to recognize the Holy Spirit at work. Cardinal Walter Kasper put it this way: "The Holy Spirit is the Cinderella of the Trinity: All the work. None of the credit."

Our ignorance is nothing new. St. Paul conveyed a similar sense in his letter to the Romans when he wrote, "For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."⁵ Paul is right. We cannot even (say/sing) the Sanctus, much less understand it—without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—without the very Spirit of the living God breathing on us, in us, and with us. No Trinity. No Eucharist.

We are all infected with a terrible error in this age. It is a dangerous residue from the Enlightenment, and its stain is so prevalent in our culture that we do not even recognize it as a recent historical innovation that needs to be questioned. You and I are breathing the air of a culture that emphasizes independence, autonomy, self-sufficiency and individualism. The secular strain of this virus stresses the privacy and responsibility of the individual, and it rewards the hard work of the individual.

The religious strain of this virus stresses the morality of the individual and rewards the faithfulness of the individual. Both strains—secular and religious—are highly infectious, and both are found in the Church culture at large, and even in this parish.

Simply put, they are not Trinitarian. Values based upon autonomy, independence and self-sufficiency fail to reflect the nature of our God as revealed in the Trinity. Michael said something in his sermon last week that served as a marvelous segue way to Trinity Sunday. While preaching about how the apostles were all together in one place, Michael observed that "*togetherness* is how our God operates."⁶

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit co-operate together. This aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity was clarified at the Council of Toledo in the year 675, which stressed the social and relational nature of the 3 persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

⁴ Nicene Creed, Book of Common Prayer, p. 359.

⁵ Romans 8:26

⁶ Michael Bullock, Sermon at St. Martin's in the Fields Episcopal Church. Feast of Pentecost—May, 2007.

In the Middle Ages, Richard of St. Victor also stressed sharing and partnership in the Trinity, and went even further to elaborate on how we can discover the trinity in human relations. In fact, we probably best honor our God not by fine-tuning our theology, but by working on our relationships, not by finding fault (or even praising) any given individual's morality or faithfulness but by seeking more of the "togetherness" of God in our Church—and even in this parish.

Rather than evolving to even clearer understandings of the Trinity since the Middle Ages, we have settled for a generic American "religious ethos" in which God acts as an autonomous force or a self-sufficient being or a private experience. But our God is not revealed as independent, distant and self-sufficient.

No! Our God is inherently relational and personal.⁷ Our God is revealed in the visions of prophets like Isaiah and seers like John of Patmos as *most holy* (i.e. most set apart) when discovered in the very center, the very midst of heaven and earth (i.e. *not* set apart).

When we gather as one body in worship, God is in the midst of us, revealed to us again in the proclamation of the Word and in the breaking of the bread, seen and unseen. In our worship, part of how we acknowledge the unity of one God, undivided, is by becoming one Body with Him and with one another. After all, togetherness is how our God operates!

At Holy Baptism we are adopted into one Body and one Spirit, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. Accordingly, we are also adopted into the very personal relations of the Holy Trinity. We are adopted into personal relations—not *private* relations or *autonomous* relations or *self-sufficient* relations—but *personal* relations. Togetherness is how our God operates.

The catechism defines a sacrament (like Holy Eucharist or Holy Baptism) as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace.⁸ What is outward and visible—in the visions of Isaiah, of John, of the Incarnate Christ, and of this Sacrament of Bread and Wine also becomes inward and spiritual through the work, guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit as we ourselves become members—together—of this holy and mystical communion.

A God who is this *holy* and yet so *personal*, this *heavenly* and yet so *near*, this *invisible* and yet so *accessible* requires a name.⁹ And the blessed and Holy Name we have been given is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life*, (Colorado Springs, CO:Navpress, 2006), p. 106.

⁸ Book of Common Prayer, p. 857.

⁹ Robert Jenson, in particular, notes how the Trinity is the name we have received for our God.