

St. Gregory's Episcopal Church

480 South Beverwyck Road

Parsippany, New Jersey 07054

Trinity Sunday (A)

June 4, 2023

A Sermon by the Rev. Joseph Parrish

DRAFT

“The Holy Trinity”

The Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Holy God, we worship you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We baptize a child in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in a way, that is how we see the Holy Trinity (quote) "in action" (end quote).

And as you probably know, we have always baptized people in the Name of the Trinity--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity sets off Christians from all other world religions. We Christians believe that God exists in three “persons”, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This was not always historically the case, however. The word for Trinity ("trias" in the Greek) as applied to God was first recorded in writing in about 180 AD as being used by Bishop Theophilus of Antioch, Syria. This was over fifty years after the last book of the Bible was written. The word, Trinity, does not appear anywhere in the Bible. However, the

"concept" of the Trinity is found throughout the Bible. For example, three figures representing God visited the patriarch Abraham in Genesis, Chapter 18. Isaiah, Chapter 6, Verse 3, worships God in three-fold fashion in the Sanctus which we use every Sunday in the Holy Eucharist--"Holy, holy, holy." These are the first words of one of our most favorite hymns of the church, the one which we used for the procession this morning--"Holy, holy, holy." The Old Testament books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes refer to God, the wisdom of God, and the Spirit of God, side by side. The concept of the Trinity appears at the

baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River as recorded in the text of Matthew 3:16. A voice from heaven speaks, and the Spirit of God descends like a dove on Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son. The Annunciation of the birth of the Son of God in Luke 1:35 is made by the archangel Gabriel, bringing a message directly from the Lord. Gabriel tells Mary the blessed event will happen when the Holy Spirit comes upon the Virgin Mary and the power of the Most High God "overshadows" her. The trinitarian idea also appears in the gospel of John, Chapter 14, and in First Peter 1:2; in First Corinthians 12:4-6; and in Second Corinthians 13:13,

which we read as our Epistle lesson for this morning.

So even though the word, "Trinity," as describing God was coined in the second century, the idea of God in three persons, or three aspects, was always present in the Holy Scriptures.

In a lecture honoring one of the former Bishops of the Diocese of New Jersey, Mellick Belshaw, the Anglican Bishop Rowan Williams of the diocese of Monmouth, Wales, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury, cited an interesting visual depiction of the Trinity. In the garden of the Bishop of Exeter, England,

is a sculpture of three large figures who represent a sculpturer's expression of the Trinity. The three figures in stone are in three different positions. One figure is bent as though it is pouring something from a vessel. A second figure is formed as though it is holding a cup to receive something poured. And the third figure of this depiction of the Trinity is folding its arms together as though it were cradling something. One might interpret these figures as God pouring out blessings on humanity, as God receiving the prayers and adoration from humanity, and as God comforting humanity as a mother would

comfort and cradle her child. Bishop Williams said one could spend much time walking around these three sculptured figures and meditating on what they mean. The figures are the artist's depiction of the "Trinity." Indeed, surely God does pour out on us blessings from above, like the figure posed in a pouring posture. And God is happy to receive our worshipful praises and prayers, like the figure posed in a receiving posture. God also comforts us in times of trouble and distress, like the figure posed in a cradling posture. So these figures express in solid form something that cannot ever be fully described by human beings. If we

could understand God and the Trinity, we would be God, which of course we are not. So any figure or image, real or imaginary, which represents the Holy Trinity will always fall short in one way or another in its description of one of the most profound characteristics of God: that one single God exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Occasionally one will hear someone give what is supposedly a non-sexist church blessing, using the words "in the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier." Now do not snicker when you hear that heresy. But it is actually heretical because it

replaces God the Father with the concept of Creator, God the Son with Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit with Sanctifier. It is somewhat of a modern attempt to use non-gender specific words to describe God.

However, God is apparently comfortable with being described as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, any one of which are Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, and two of which use masculine nouns. That is not to say that God is masculine, as some would try to describe God, but that God is often known as a father-like figure. Jesus referred to our Father in heaven as "Abba," that is a Hebrew word meaning, "Papa," or "Daddy."

And Jesus referred to himself as Son of God. Yet the final elusive figure, the Holy Spirit, is probably a derivative of the Old Testament and Apocryphal aspect of God called the Wisdom of God. The Wisdom of God is most often a feminine noun in Hebrew, although "Spirit" ("pneuma") is a neuter or sexless noun in the Greek. In the Hebrew original of the first chapter of Genesis that was our Old Testament reading for today, "ruach," or the "wind" of God is active in creation. "Ruach" is a feminine Hebrew noun for "Spirit, wind, or breath," although there are a few times in the Old Testament when "ruach" is a masculine

noun. Yet although the sex of God is actually neither male nor female, God created sex and thus God must have all the qualities of the feminine as well as the masculine. To call God, "Her," is probably no more correct than to call God, "Him."

Yet our old ways die slowly. Some fundamentalist folk will insist on the "he-ness" of God, which is no more likely accurate than the "she-ness" of God. But in reading Bible reflections and devotions, one will probably find God is often given a sex of one kind or another.

Trinity Sunday became popular in much of the world in 1334 when Pope John the

Twenty-second decreed that Trinity Sunday was to be observed everywhere every year. However, Trinity Sunday was already quite popular in England, and Trinity Sunday became especially so when in 1162 Thomas Becket was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury on Trinity Sunday.

The Trinity was a major source of contention in the early year 325 when the Nicene Creed was formulated. You might want to take out the red Prayer Book in front of you in the pew holder and look up the Nicene Creed on Pages 326 or 358 (326 or 358). At that time in around 325 one schismatic group called the Arians, among

others, contended against the interpretation of the Trinity as including Jesus Christ as the Logos or Word of God. The Arians wanted to describe Jesus as being somehow elevated by God to deity only 'after' his great miracles had been worked. The Arians did not want to permit the idea of the preexistence of the Son with the Father before Creation. However, the orthodoxy of the church prevailed, and Arianism was defeated, only to reappear later in the Episcopal Church, as some have joked. But the most orthodox viewpoint is that in the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God and the Word was God, as the

prologue to the Gospel of John says. So we Christians recognize the Son of God as existing before creation.

Other early ideas of the trinitarian quality of God were conceived by the late second century, early third century, famous lay theologian, Tertullian. Tertullian conceived of the "generation" or 'begotting' of the Son of God as being due to the act of thinking on the part of God the Father. God 'thought' the Word, and the Word was "begotten, not made," as the Nicene Creed says. God thought the Word and it came into being. Yet the Word was of the same divine substance as was God the Father—as the

Creed says, "of one Being with the Father."
You can see this phrase in the seventh line of the second paragraph of the Creed. Later the Creed will state that the Son was born of the Virgin Mary.

Another famous early theologian, Bishop Augustine of Hippo, north Africa, said the Holy Spirit could be understood as the love of God the Father for God the Son. The Holy Spirit expressed divine love, the love of the whole divinity of God.

A third important theologian, Bishop Hilary of Poitiers, France, in the fourth century argued successfully against a variety of heretical sects and said that the Holy

Trinity was “indivisible”. The Trinity could not be separated into parts. The Trinity was in and of itself completely God, the one undivided God. The Trinity is not three gods, but one indivisible God.

And a final important name in the formulation of Trinitarian beliefs is Bishop Athanasius, the fourth century Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. Athanasius said, "Grace ... is given by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit." "Grace ... is given by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit." And Bishop Athanasius initiated a very important trinitarian Creed that is known by

his name. The Athanasian Creed is found on Page 864 in the red Prayer Book.

All these ideas of how the Trinity functions and how the Trinity is an accurate description of God are only at best approximations of what the Trinity fully means. However, the Trinity is key to the understanding of early church history and the rise and fall of various and sundry heresies. Many of these heresies wanted to subordinate Jesus Christ as being beneath or lesser than God.

Some rigid and misguided interpretations have occurred for another aspect of today's gospel reading, which has been named the

Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." These misguided interpretations of the Great Commission have led throughout history to a variety of Crusades, holy wars, and Christian imperialism in general. However, the true word of the Lord is not to drive out or in any way persecute those who do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. But the Great Commission says instead to "make disciples" of them, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything" Jesus has commanded us. Ethnic cleansing is nowhere condoned in

God's word, nor is attacking those who have done such ethnic cleansing condoned in the Bible either.

The Reverend Steve Kelsey, once an area cluster minister in the Diocese of Connecticut said, "God is friendship, and those who live in friendship, live in God." That bears repeating, "God is friendship, and those who live in friendship, live in God."

Yet the other side of the call for evangelism which Matthew, Chapter 28, speaks about has also been under-recognized as well. I will close with one story that illustrates how the words of Jesus were not

followed in another way. This is a story of history related by British writer, Dr. John Foster. Khubla Khan, the medieval sovereign of China, in 1269 sent a request from Peking. Khubla Khan asked for (quote) "one hundred wise men of all the Christian religion ... and so I shall be baptized, and when I shall be baptized, all my barons and great men shall be baptized, and then their subjects will receive baptism, and so there will be more Christians here [in China] than there are in your parts [of the world]" (end quote). Everything points to the fact that at that very time in the thirteenth century the Mongols were

wavering in their choice of a religion. It might have occurred just as Khubla Khan forecast. It would have been the greatest mass movement towards Christianity the world has ever known. The history of all Asia would have been changed. But here is what happened. The Church was busy with its own affairs, and Pope Gregory the Tenth answered the request for one hundred wise men by sending two friars. The two friars eventually reached Armenia, near modern day Turkey, nowhere near China. There in Armenia the two friars decided they could not endure the journey any longer, and they turned back to Rome. Perhaps the greatest

opportunity for evangelism the Church has had in 2,000 years was thus lost

As you meditate on the meaning of Jesus' Great Commission in your life, remember Khubla Khan. Today he may be your grocer or your mail person. She may be your pharmacist or your politician or your relative. Khubla Khan, I believe, lives in all those who are not yet converted to the Way of Jesus Christ.

We are the minds and hands and mouths and feet of Christ. Jesus needs us. Will we obey? Will we follow Christ's calling to carry the Gospel to all the nations and indeed even to our own acquaintances and

neighborhoods and towns and cities? Let us pray for the Lord to help each of us carry out in love this Great Commission. Amen.

“The Holy Trinity”

Description

The idea of the Holy Trinity abounds in the New and Old Testaments. In 325 the Trinity became ensconced in the Christian Church in the words of the Nicene Creed. All members of Christ’s church are baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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Tags

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