

Trinity Sunday
St Mark's, Tampa
18 May 2008

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

All over the Christian world today, preachers are beginning their sermons by explaining that this is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday of the church year devoted to a doctrine.

But they're wrong. Yes, this is Trinity Sunday, but it's not devoted to a doctrine. The Trinity isn't a doctrine; the Trinity is *God*. There's a doctrine *about* the Trinity, but that's not what we're celebrating today. No, what makes this Sunday unique is that on Trinity Sunday we don't celebrate something God has *done*; we celebrate who God *is*. We try, however briefly, however inadequately, to look behind the mighty works of God and see the mighty Worker himself.

To do that, though, we need a doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity is not the object of our celebration, but it *is* the roadmap that we have to follow – the guidebook that leads us into the inner life of God himself. They probably teach people in seminary that you shouldn't preach doctrine. But God in his mercy did not send me to seminary, so today I'm preaching doctrine. I'm sure they also teach people not to do that hopelessly old-fashioned kind of sermon that consists in "three points, a poem, and a prayer." Well, I'll spare you the poem and the prayer, but if you can't do three points on Trinity Sunday, when *can* you do three points?

So here are my three points. First, I'm going to talk about what the doctrine of the Trinity *is*. Second, I'm going to talk about why you should believe it. And third, I'm going to talk about why the doctrine of the Trinity *matters*.

I hope you won't mind that I'm starting with what the doctrine of the Trinity *is*. We all know that, right? But I wonder. Almost every sermon I've ever heard on the Trinity – and this is in both Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches – has been heretical in one way or another. (I should point out that I wasn't here last Trinity Sunday, and I have no doubt that the priests of this parish are perfectly orthodox on this point as on all others.) The last time I tried to teach the doctrine in a Religious Studies class, my students simply refused to believe that the doctrine was what I said it was. And they weren't a bunch of heathens either – they were evangelicals of various kinds, a couple

of Lutherans, and, I'm afraid, an Episcopalian from this very diocese. So here goes.

At its core, the doctrine of the Trinity is very simple. God is one, and God is also three. God is *really* one – so much so that the only correct answer to the question “How many gods are there?” is *one*. But God is also *really* three.

Three what? Three persons, we say – but don't let the word 'persons' throw you. As Saint Augustine said, we have to say three *somethings*, and 'persons' is no worse than any other word you might choose, and better than a lot of them.

People don't get tripped up much by the oneness part, but there's a lot of misunderstanding among Christians about the threeness. The thing to keep very firmly in mind is that God is *really* three – not just three in the way we think about him, or three in the way we experience him, or three in the names we give him, but really and truly three in himself. If God had never created – if there were no one to think about or experience God other than God himself – God would still be a trinity of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The tendency to think of God's threeness as a matter of *our* thinking, rather than of *God's* very being, is so persistent that theologians have identified it as a heresy and given it a name. It's called “modalism,” because it says that the three persons are merely “modes” or ways in which God acts or is experienced. Most of the sermons I've heard on the Trinity have fallen into some variety of modalism.

So the core of the doctrine is simply that God is *really* one and also *really* three. All the theological elaboration is basically an attempt to figure out how to do justice to the oneness of God without compromising the threeness, and how to do justice to the threeness of God without compromising the oneness. There is one and only one God, we say, and yet this one God is, in and of himself, eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a Trinity of persons in unity of being, divine love eternally bestowed and eternally received.

So – to proceed to my second point – why should you believe that? Why should you accept this confusing claim about a God who is really and truly three and yet somehow also really and truly one? I want to give you two reasons: because it honors the Lord Jesus, and because it honors the Church.

The doctrine of the Trinity honors the Lord Jesus because it affirms that Jesus is who he says he is and does what he says he does. Jesus spoke of God as his Father. Jesus

identified himself very closely with the Father: "I and the Father are one," he said, and "He who has seen me has seen the Father." But he also spoke of the Father as someone different from him, who sent him and gave him all authority. He prayed to the Father and did, not his own will, but the will of the Father.

So if Jesus is who he says he is, he is God – the same God as the Father, but not the same person as the Father.

Jesus also promised that he would send us the Holy Spirit, another Comforter or Counselor or Advocate, who would be with us and lead us into all truth and help us understand everything that he taught. And this Holy Spirit must also be God, since who other than God can lead us into all truth? Who other than God could be another Comforter or Counselor or Advocate like Jesus?

So if Jesus does what he says he does, he send us God the Holy Spirit – the same God as the Father and the Son, but not the same person as the Father and the Son.

And so I say that we believe and preach the doctrine of the Trinity because it honors the Lord Jesus: it proclaims that Jesus is who he says he is and does what he says he does. But we should also believe the doctrine of the Trinity because it honors the Church. Time and again, as the Church was hammering out its understanding of God, it had the chance to make things easier. There was never any shortage of urbane and learned clergy with degrees from fancy schools trying to sell watered-down, plausible, philosophically slick teachings about God instead of this embarrassing, difficult, mysterious business about one God in Trinity of Persons and Unity of Substance. And every time the Church had the option to make things easier and more philosophically palatable, it said no. It didn't say no because it was ignoring the difficulties. It said no because all the watered-down, plausible, philosophically slick compromises did not do justice to the way that God had revealed himself to us in Scripture and in the person of Jesus. The Fathers of the Church who worked out the doctrine of the Trinity knew philosophy as well as anyone else – but they weren't going to let merely human ideas about what is reasonable stand in the way of being honest about who God has shown himself to be. In accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, we honor the Church by joining in that recognition that God is God and we are not, and that we don't have the luxury of domesticating the divine nature as though we were making God up for ourselves.

I have talked about what the doctrine of the Trinity *is*: that God is *really* three and *really* one. I have talked about how believing the doctrine of the Trinity honors the Lord Jesus

and honors the Church. But the most important point is my last one: Why does any of this matter?

Well, the answer to that question could be several sermons in itself, but let me suggest briefly how knowing God as a Trinity should be essential to our thinking and praying and living as Christians. In carrying out the commandment that we heard in today's Gospel, to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge that the divine life that is inaugurated in us by baptism is a Trinitarian life. It is the life of perfect love, perfectly bestowed and perfectly received, never stinting, never shirking, never tiring. What could be more awesome, more empowering, than to meditate on that community of Persons into which we have been baptized, to see our life becoming conformed to the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love that is God the Father, and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit?

When you start to think of the doctrine of the Trinity not as a theological conundrum to keep seminary professors employed, but as our roadmap into the divine life into which the grace of Jesus Christ calls us, you will begin to see the Trinity at work everywhere. This is something that I can't impart by preaching about it. I just have to invite you to try it, in your praying and meditating, and in your worship and in your service. You will see an image of the Trinity even at the altar. For in the priest Jesus sacramentally offers himself to the Father. Through the mystery of consecration and communion, a connection is made, and the Spirit descends, bestowing gifts of grace.

But the priest at the altar represents and incarnates the priesthood of the whole congregation, the priesthood of every one of us who has been baptized into the name of the Holy Trinity. And each of us is a priest in this holy action, standing as Christ, offering himself in us, and us in himself, to the Father; and on each of us the Holy Spirit descends.

And so to the source of all our joys and the aim of all our prayers, to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the Holy and Undivided Trinity, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*