

Trinity Sunday (2016)

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And one cried unto another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of His glory.'

✠In the Name. . . .

When I took History of the Catholic Church in college, I distinctly remember the professor, who was a diocesan Roman Catholic priest, telling the class that most every priest wandered into heresy of some kind the first five years of his priesthood when he preached on Trinity Sunday. Given that I shall celebrate the fifth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood this coming August, I fear this is the last Trinity Sunday I shall have a carte blanche to wander into heresy. I cannot help but wonder if the tendency wanes after five years because the average priest has a keener grasp on the deep theology surrounding the mystery of the Trinity, or he is just wise enough to avoid statements of substance that could get him into trouble. Alas, I shall have to wait until Trinity Sunday next year to let you know for sure!

The irony is that the lessons chosen for our service this morning are older than our current kalendar, and so were chosen for when the Church celebrated the Octave of Pentecost today rather than Trinity Sunday. The feast of the Trinity had its origin in the Northern reaches of the Church, gaining popularity in Scandinavia, Germany and Britain (in the latter due primarily to the patronage of Thomas Becket, the ill-fated Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry II), but resisted by the Church in Rome because it was too liberal of a concept. The Church of Rome was hesitant to include feasts on the kalendar which were purely theological and did not have a basis in an historical event. Eventually Rome relented and in 1334 Pope John XXII directed the feast to be celebrated throughout the Church. Yet liturgical students will notice that there continued to be a divergence in how the Sundays following were numbered: The Roman Church counted the Sundays after Pentecost, so next week would be the [Second] Sunday after Pentecost; while the Sarum Missal, and consequently the Book of Common Prayer, counted the Sundays after Trinity, so next week will be the First Sunday After Trinity. Of course, a funny thing happened on the way to the Liturgical Movement, so beginning in the 1970s the Roman Church began numbering the Sundays as "Ordinary Time", which actually begins after Epiphany in January, leaves off in Lent, and then picks up again next week. Contemporary Anglicanism uses a variety of systems including numbering the Sunday as the "Proper" whatever number, but also using the old Roman System, even though that branch has ceased to use it. But that is fodder for another sermon. What is important is that both of the traditional numbering systems

have merit: the system numbering the Sundays after Pentecost suggests the long life of the Church, in which we find ourselves now, guided by the Holy Ghost, yet awaiting the final Advent of Our Lord. The system numbering the Sundays after Trinity suggests the long season in the Church year where we grow (hence the liturgical color green) in our understanding of the life of Christ, but with the application of the Holy Trinity, as opposed to the historical chronology we experience during Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter.

So, after our history lesson, where does that leave us as far as any useful application of this Trinity Sunday? In our contemporary church, where the only real sin is failing to be “nice” to everyone, the concept of the Trinity almost seems irrelevant, like an answer looking for a question. This is where you hope I will say something “new” about the Trinity, because you have heard St. Patrick’s shamrock analogy, and the whole “three persons, one God” routine too many times to count. On the other hand, if I say something totally new about the Trinity, then I likely will be saying something heretical, and that is not a hallmark for which I am striving in my ministry!

The Prophet Isaiah did not know the dogma of the Trinity, although God chose him as one who would foretell the coming of the Messiah. King Uzziah did not know the dogma of the Trinity either, but Isaiah places him at the beginning of the chapter to give an historical context to the vision he is about to share. Moreover, it clues us in to the fact that this is the same passage that has given inspiration to anthems we hear at the Advent service of Lessons and Carols, emphasizing its importance in Anglican circles. Yet here we are with this lesson, which is the only one of the three appointed for today, that was actually chosen for the Feast of the Holy Trinity! This is not by accident, not that the lessons chosen ever are, but because the early Fathers of the Church believed this passage pointed to the unity of the Three persons of the Trinity contained in one God. Isaiah had a vision where he saw the Lord in a heavenly throne room, in what sounds like a liturgy already in progress. You will notice that Isaiah sees “the Lord” on His throne. Naturally when we hear those words “the Lord” in the Old Testament, we assume they refer to God the Father. The Church Fathers, St. Jerome included, believed however that Isaiah saw God the Son, because no one dared to look upon God the Father. The conventional wisdom among the Jews was that it would cause death. Regardless of the result, we know from the book of Exodus that even Moses did not look upon the face of God the Father, but only saw His backside.

In the third verse we hear the seraphims, the highest order of angels in the hierarchy, praising God with the thrice proclaimed, “Holy, holy, holy,” one for each of the three persons. These words of course, are incorporated into the hymn we sing immediately before the Consecration of the Body and Blood of Christ at the Holy Communion.

The posts of the door moved, or shook in some translations, at the voice of the cry, which the Fathers believed was at the time of the curtain being ripped in two at the time of the crucifixion. That veil prevented the Jews from going directly to God, a posture reserved only for the priestly class, and the Holy of Holies for only the High Priest once annually, but Christ opened the door so that all who believed might metaphorically approach the throne of God in prayer on this side of heaven, so that we might be able to approach the actual throne of God on the other side of heaven.

Isaiah recognizes his unworthiness, in the fifth verse, to stand in the presence of the Lord of Hosts. Like Moses, he is unable to speak in the Divine Presence, but one of the

seraphims removes a hot coal and brings it to Isaiah in order to cleanse him from his unworthiness. It is worth noting that in the prayer before the Gospel in our service, the priest prays that like Isaiah with the coal, the priest will be made worthy to proclaim the Holy Gospel. If one dwells long on that procedure as a way to purge oneself of sin, it will make one careful in the words and activities one chooses!

Finally in the last verse, the Lord asks whom He shall send, and who will go for “us”, a switch from the singular to the plural, indicating He is speaking for all three Persons of the Undivided Trinity. The key, and the take-away for us, comes in the last verse: Isaiah responds, “Here am I; send me.” That is the response Our Lord wants to hear from each and every one of us! Not, “Oh, sorry Lord, I am too old.” Not, “Oh sorry Lord, I am too tired.” And not “Oh, sorry Lord, I am too busy.” I suspect trivial activities of our own creation will receive the least amount of sympathy from the Almighty! God the Father has created us in His own image. God the Son has redeemed us from our sins. And God the Holy Ghost has sanctified, strengthened, and built us up so that we might have the stamina to complete whatever task has been given to us. God will not give any of us a task that is impossible, but I suspect the word “easy” is not often in our Lord’s vocabulary. He will not give us anything that is beyond our capabilities, but that does not mean it will not be outside of our comfort zone. All He asks is that we approach our task with the same eager spirit of Isaiah: “Here am I Lord; send me.”

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