

God in Three Persons

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church on Trinity Sunday, May 25, 1986: Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 8:22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; *John* 16:12-15.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost. It's also evangelism Sunday in the Presbyterian Church. I can't think of anything less evangelistic or more likely to put a person to sleep than a sermon trying to explain the Trinity. What in the world do evangelism and the doctrine of the Trinity have to do with one another?

The Trinity is a complicated doctrine. Some would say it's an incomprehensible doctrine, something that the theologians have added to the simple gospel to make things a little more difficult and which has nothing to do with life or ethics. Evangelism, on the other hand, has to do with the good news of Jesus Christ.

But what is the good news? The good news is that through Jesus Christ we have peace with God. The good news is that Jesus has given us the hope of sharing in the glory of God's final and total triumph over this world with all its oppression, violence, sin and injustice. The good news is that in the light of that final victory we can rejoice in our sufferings knowing that our hope won't disappoint us. The good news is that God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has given to us to lead us into all truth.

But wait a second. I've been talking about the Trinity when I've been talking about the Gospel. Christians have always found it impossible to evangelize without speaking of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. As Karl Barth once said, Christians can't say all that needs to be said about God unless they speak of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But how did the Trinity ever entered into the vocabulary of Christians?

The word isn't found anyplace in the Bible. The Trinity was first of all experienced by the early Christians and only later explained. So instead of trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity let me try to show how Christians came to believe that God is a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

First, people knew God as *above and beyond*. They worshipped God as creator, a being wholly other from this world, mysterious, to be feared, and held in awe. They knew God through the wonder of creation, through his hand in nature, and through his mighty acts in history, when he delivered them out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land. From the fire and thick smoke of Sinai he gave them laws. Later he sent them prophets to guide and correct them and priests to offer sacrifices for their sins. This God was really loved and trusted as one loves and stands in awe of a distant, powerful parent. And yet despite this relationship of love and trust there remained a longing, a desire for a more intimate relationship with God. So in that long advent season before the coming of Jesus the unspoken prayer of men and women who knew this God was, "O come, o come Emmanuel."

One day that longing was fulfilled and they came to know God, not only as God *above and beyond*, but as God, *here and now*. This is how it happened. There came one named Jesus. He lived in obscurity for thirty years and then began to preach, teach, heal and call disciples to himself. He told stories about God. God, he said, is a Father waiting for his prodigal son to come home. God is a mother who longs to have her children safely beneath her wings. God is a shepherd who goes out in search of his lost sheep.

All sorts of sinful men and women were attracted to him. In his

presence, they felt that God really loved them. Through Jesus they experienced God's forgiveness. They came to feel that they, sinful as they were, had as much access to God's grace as the scribes and pharisees. They listened to Jesus and trusted him and felt at peace with God.

The religious establishment found all this quite unnerving. The popularity of Jesus threatened their authority. Eventually Jesus brought their wrath upon himself and he was executed as a common criminal. It looked like the days of Camelot were over. But several days after his death Jesus appeared to them more alive than ever and for forty days he continued to teach them. From that time on it was impossible for them to think about God or to approach God in worship except through their experiences with Jesus. They addressed Jesus in prayer as they would address God; as Lord. ~~And yet never did they abandon their resolute belief~~ in one God. Never do they give the impression that they're worshipping two Gods.

Then they came to experience God in a third way, as *God everywhere and always*. It happened this way. Jesus left them on Ascension day. They were standing on the Mt of Olives and saw him disappear before their very eyes in a cloud. They were bereft of his physical presence. They continued to meet in secret for fear of the Jews and to lament their loss of Christ. But fifty days after Easter and ten days after the Ascension the Holy Spirit came upon them suddenly like the sound of a mighty rushing wind. The Spirit gave them power and courage and filled them with the sense of adventure and gave them a vision of going into all the world with the message of Jesus.

In the days of his earthly ministry Jesus could be only in one place at a time. But now they sensed that Jesus was still with them through this

Spirit everywhere and always. They relied on the Spirit as once they'd relied on the historical Jesus. No longer was Christ there in the flesh to tell them what to say and do. No longer could they return to him from their missionary journeys and discuss with him what had happened. Yet they continued to feel that Christ was guiding them and leading them in the momentous decisions they had to make in the early church. When they encountered new situations they remembered the words of Jesus, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth". So the gathered church sought the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus and then acted boldly, trusting that Jesus was really leading them. They prayed to the Spirit as they once talked to Christ. Yet they worshipped not two gods or three, but one God whom they had experienced as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

So Christians experienced God in three ways; as God *above and beyond*, the creator and sustainer of the universe, as God *here and now*, in the historical Jesus, and as God *everywhere and always*, in the Holy Spirit. Over the years theologians tried to explain this strange, mysterious and uniquely Christian experience. After over four hundred years they worked out the classic statement of the doctrine in the Athanasian Creed, "the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate(d), the Son uncreate(d), and the Holy Ghost uncreate(d). The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost

incomprehensible." And some would add, "The whole thing
incomprehensible."

But even if the doctrine sounds incomprehensible Christians simply
can't get away from experiencing the Trinity. We instinctively feel that to
say simply, "I believe in God" is not adequate. "Tell me about this God you
believe in?" we're asked. And when we attempt an answer we find
ourselves talking about the God *above and beyond* who created the
universe; and God *here and now*, who appeared in space and time and
history in the person of Jesus; and God *everywhere and always*, who
pours God's love into our hearts.

You don't come to experience God's love, however, through a study of the
doctrine of the Trinity. You can believe the doctrine and not know God,
~~just as you can believe that Ronald Reagan is president without either~~
knowing or trusting him. On the other hand you may not understand the
doctrine and yet still love God, just as I've never been able to fully
understand my wife but I still love her. How, then, do we come to know
God's love? I answer, not dogmatically, but only from personal experience.
The more I trust Christ as I read about him in the Bible and worship him in
the church the more I experience God's love poured into my heart by the
Holy Spirit; and the more confident I am that the Holy Spirit will guide me
and the church in the difficult decisions the future holds for us.

Amen

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you have given to us your servants grace, by the
confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your
divine Majesty to worship the Unity: Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to
see you in your one and eternal glory, O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Sprit live and reign, one
God, forever and ever. Amen.