

## Why Such a Complicated God?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Trinity Sunday, June 7, 1998. Scripture lessons: Proverbs 8:1-4, 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.

On July 16, 1945, a brilliant flash in the New Mexico desert lit the surrounding mountains brighter than the noon sun. The flash released four times the heat of the interior of the sun and was observed 250 miles away. The brilliant flash was caused by the detonation of the first atomic bomb. The test was the conclusion of the Manhattan Project to build the bomb in a frantic race with Adolph Hitler's scientists. The explosion ushered in the nuclear age and led to Japan's surrender. At least one journalist asserts that the detonation of the first atomic bomb was the most momentous event of the twentieth century. It also set off a debate about the morality of using such awesome force. The debate continues today as a result of the Pakistani and Indian detonation of nuclear weapons two weeks ago.

Isadore Rabi, a scientist who helped develop the A-bomb was present on that day fifty three years ago. He later wrote, "Suddenly there was an enormous flash of light, the brightest light I have ever seen or I think that anyone has seen." Robert Oppenheimer, another scientist who worked on the Manhattan Project quoted <sup>an ominous</sup> a Hindu verse after witnessing the explosion: "I am become death; the shatterer of worlds." The director of the project, Kenneth Bainbridge watched the column of fire and dust climb seven miles in the sky and then <sup>using vulgar language</sup> ~~commented~~ <sup>said</sup> somewhat cynically to his colleagues, "Now we are all sons of bitches."

It took America's brightest minds years to create the bomb. Albert Einstein was the most brilliant of all. His formula,  $E=MC^2$ , enabled other scientists to develop the bomb. Einstein theorized that large quantities of energy can result from tiny amounts of mass if the mass is completely changed into energy. The successful detonation of the first A-bomb proved his theory to be true. The plutonium fuel used in the first atomic bomb was only about the size of an orange and yet it produced a man-made explosion the likes of which the world had never seen before.

Now, what does all this have to do with why we're here this morning. Today is Trinity Sunday. The Sunday after Pentecost Sunday is called Trinity Sunday. It's the one Sunday in the church year that celebrates a doctrine rather than an event. For example, Advent and Christmas celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ. Lent and Easter celebrate the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit. But Trinity Sunday celebrates the doctrine of the Trinity.

And that's what made me think of the first detonation of the A-bomb in July of 1945. The code name for the first atomic explosion was *Trinity*. The site chosen for the testing of the world's first atomic bomb was *Trinity Site*, near Alamogordo, NM. Why did they give the A-bomb test such a theological code name? Why did they choose Trinity Site? I don't know. I was thinking about this last week. I thought, "What an inappropriate name for the site, *Trinity*. It's kind of like naming a nuclear submarine *Corpus Christi*, the *Body of Christ*. Why link an event so destructive, so potentially evil, with the Christian understanding of God?

The more I pondered these questions, the more I <sup>looked for</sup> ~~began to see~~ a connection.

1. For one thing, Christians at their worst have used the doctrine of the Trinity as a weapon as destructive as the A-bomb. Throughout history more people have been put to death by Christians for refusing to confess the Trinitarian faith than have died in nuclear explosions. One of the most shameful events in the history of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches was when the city council of Geneva with the support of John Calvin voted to execute Michael Servetus because he did not believe in the Trinity. During the 12th century Crusades, soldiers took up the cross and traveled to the Holy Land to rescue the Holy Sites from Islamic infidels who didn't believe in the Trinity. Throughout the ages, when Christians have exercised great political power they've often used their power destructively to kill, torture and persecute people who don't believe in the Trinity. Christians, at our best, however, do not use the doctrine of the Trinity as a weapon of mass destruction. Rather we want all people, everywhere to discover that the God who created the universe loves us so much that he has come to us personally in the life,

The second person in the Holy Trinity

The Third Person

death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we believe that the Spirit of God is the Lord, the giver of life.

2. There's another connection between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the explosion of the first A-bomb. Both nuclear physics and the doctrine of the Trinity are hard to understand. I can repeat Einstein's formula,  $E=MC^2$ , but I don't really understand it. And I can repeat the formula for the Trinity; one God in three persons, but I don't really understand how that's possible. How can three persons be one God. But reality is always mysterious. We seek to understand reality but we never achieve perfect understanding. The reality of nuclear physics is beyond my capacity to understand and yet I believe that Einstein's theory is true. And God's reality is beyond my capacity to understand but I confess God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe in order that I might come to understand.

3. There's a third connection between the doctrine of the Trinity and the first atomic explosion. The power of nuclear energy existed long before Einstein formulated the equation  $E=MC^2$ . Einstein merely expressed the formula in a way that no one before had been able to do. In that respect Einstein was like Sir Isaac Newton who formulated equations that help us understand gravity better. Newton didn't invent gravity, he merely formulated an equation that described what gravity does. The doctrine of the Trinity is something like that. God has always existed as one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian theologians, however, did not formulate the doctrine of the Trinity until four hundred years after the birth of Jesus. They didn't invent the Trinity, however. The Trinity was always there. They simply found words that express what Christians had come to believe about God.

The word *Trinity* doesn't occur in the Bible. The idea of the Trinity, however, is present from Genesis through Revelation. For example, in our Scripture lesson Saint Paul writes "...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... and God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." Christians understand this to mean that we have peace with God the Father through God the Son, Jesus Christ. And the love of God the Father has been poured into our hearts through God the Holy Spirit. God reached out to sinful men and women through

his Son, Jesus Christ. As he walked among us as a man, Jesus showed us the love of God in action. As he hung on the cross, he freed us from sin and opened heaven's doors to us. Now risen in glory, he sends his Holy Spirit to us to warm our hearts with the knowledge of the truth.

As we come to the Lord's Table, fix your gaze on the Holy Trinity. See the mystery of the eternal love of the Father and the Son. Ask the Holy Spirit to draw us into the life of God more deeply.

Let us pray: Holy Father, Lord Jesus, most gracious Holy Spirit, I ask you to show yourself to us today. Let us experience your love today. Help us open our heart to respond in love and obedience. Amen.