

“Love Poured In” – Rom 5:1-5 – Trinity Sunday

I have to admit it. It may come as a surprise to some of you, but not to all. I have to admit that there are some Sundays in the Lectionary Year that preachers dread, and today is one of them for me. Trinity Sunday, the Sunday upon which we focus our thought and attention upon the Doctrine of the Trinity, the understanding of God as three-in-one, three distinct and separate personalities yet all one God. Trying to understand the nature of God and the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is a bit of a mind-bending exercise. The early church wrestled with it for almost four hundred years, so it's a bit arrogant of me to think I can get it across to you in seventeen minutes – however, I'll do my best to do so, because it's important.

The problem, like the subject of the Trinity, is a three-way conflict. That conflict arises from trying to hold together three separate foundational understandings that seem irreconcilable with each other. The first is the biblical understanding of monotheism, that there is a living God who is unique. This understanding stands at the root of the Old Testament faith, as the people who became ancient Israel came to know that God exists, that God stands outside of creation having created the universe and all things in it yet is active still in that creation, and that God is one God. It is an understanding and belief that stands at the core of both Judaism and Islam still today. Especially for Islam that understanding of God as one, embedded as the foundational creed of Islam, “There is but one God, Allah is his name, and Mohammed is his prophet”, creates a huge if not impassible barrier in relating to Christians. To a Muslim, our Trinitarian view of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit appears as polytheism (worshipping many gods) and thus a blatant heresy.

The second component of the conflicting concepts is the distinction drawn in scripture between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. For example, in our reading from John's gospel we hear Jesus speak of “when the Spirit of truth comes”, and in other places how the Father will send the Advocate, the Counselor, the Holy Spirit. Other distinctions come to mind, such as Jesus declaring about the end times, that “only the Father knows”. There are numerous places where Jesus draws such distinctions between himself and God.

And yet, providing the third component of the conflict, there are many places in scripture where we see clearly the divinity of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and the intimate connection between all three. “I am in the Father, and the Father is in me”, Jesus declares, pointing out a connection that goes way beyond mere togetherness, to a oneness. To the gospel writers, and the apostle Paul, there was no doubt that Jesus was clearly divine, clearly one with God even before his birth and remained so in life, in death, and in his resurrection.

So, the struggle that occupied the church right up through the Councils at Nicea and Constantinople continues in our minds today, even with the formal statements (e.g. Nicene Creed) that came out of those Councils. The struggle to reconcile the apparently conflicting understandings of Biblical teachings of monotheism, Biblical language that draws distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit, and the Scriptural teachings of the divinity of the Father, Son and Spirit. Are we to understand how three Beings are yet one God, or are we to understand how One being can be spoken of in three different ways?

I suspect by now, and I think I can confirm both from glazed-over eyes and from the sounds of sleeping foreheads hitting the backs of the pews in front, that most if not all of you are asking, “so what?” This is kind of like the theological version of that great Canadian sleep-inducer “Constitutional Reform”. I'm sure the question, “what does it matter?” is rolling through your minds. Well, your own answer to this question of the Trinity matters very much, because your answer represents, if not determines, your understanding of God, and in particular your relationship with God, and since that is the ultimate purpose of mankind, it is a very, very serious question indeed.

Let's take a look at what the effects are of tending toward only one of these positions. If, for example, you tend toward an understanding of a monotheistic God, you are likely to tend toward the

Monty Python “oh God you are so terribly, terribly big and I am so insignificant” kind of view, a faith position that makes God so terribly, terribly distant, remote, legalistic and judgmental. There is little if any grace to be found in such a view, and it certainly is a long, long way from Paul’s “boasting of our hope in sharing the glory of God”.

If your tendency is to think of God as Spirit alone, there is a huge danger of being led down any one of a number of garden paths, through Eden-like paradises. “He will guide you into all truth”, Jesus tells us in John’s gospel, but unless we confirm what we are hearing against the scriptural backdrop of God’s word, against Christ’s teachings, we can easily be led by whichever wind we hear blowing.

And multiple dangers lurk in drifting into a Christ-only understanding of God. On the one hand there is the possibility of making God too human, of reforming God in our image instead of the other way around. On the other hand there is the all-too-familiar and related danger of using the gaps left by the somewhat limited earthly ministry of Jesus to our own purposes, answering the question “what would Jesus do?” with our own invention of what Jesus would have said if he were to ask us first. This approach fails to hear Jesus state, as we just did in our reading from John 5:1-5, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth...”

The protection against drifting into one of these positions is the doctrine of the Trinity. Think of it perhaps as a kind of balancing act, keeping the bubble of your faith in the middle of the triangle formed by the three somewhat conflicting views: monotheism (One God); biblical distinctions drawn between Father/Son/Spirit; and the biblical understanding of Jesus and the Spirit being divine. With a Trinitarian understanding that somehow, in ways that we are not even necessarily able to think let alone speak, God is indeed One God, and Jesus the Son is part of that One God, and so is the Holy Spirit. Not tritheistic, as in three gods blended into one. Not an ordered 1-2-3 ranking kind of partitioning of God. Instead, a God whom we experience manifested in three persons, “blessed Trinity”.

It’s important, especially on this Trinity Sunday, to ask these questions, to examine our understandings of God, not to bring discomfort or unease, but to hear again the magnificent grace of God expressed in his Son Jesus Christ and sustained in us through his Holy Spirit. God is not remote, nor distant, nor uninvolved. God has been passionately involved in the lives of people from Day 1, has loved his peoples enough to offer redemption and life through his manifestation in Christ Jesus our Lord, and continues to help us to live in that redemption through the promised and delivered gift of the Holy Spirit. While it is important to touch upon these questions, it is also quite right for us, having done so, to fall back into simply living and enjoying our faith in the same way that Paul pointed out. Having gone through a somewhat torturous explanation in the first four chapters of his letter to the Romans of how and why we are justified by faith, Paul draws a conclusion. “Therefore [he concludes], since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to the grace in which we now stand.” Assured of our position in grace, confident of our redemption through Christ, we are able “to boast of our hope of sharing the glory of God.” “Sharing the glory of God”! Isn’t that a bold boast?!

And how did this all happen? “Because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Ultimately the answer to the question of our understanding of God leads to an understanding of our relationship with God, a relationship of grace, mercy, and reconciliation through Christ our Lord and a relationship of love founded by the love poured in upon us, and that calls us to love one another in turn. All thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever.