

Trinity Sunday (June 11), 2017

Father Arthur Wooley, the most senior priest in our diocese of the Mid-Atlantic States and maybe in the whole ACC, says that there is more heresy preached on Trinity Sunday than on any other Sunday of the year. Well, I sure hope that what I say this morning on this Trinity Sunday will not be heretical! But I can truly understand and relate to Fr. Wooley's statement. Because it is truly difficult to say a whole lot about the Trinity without veering over into heresy.

Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday of the year dedicated to a doctrine of the Church. Doctrine can seem like an exceedingly dry and boring thing to most people. But since as Christians we believe that our salvation depends on the content of what we believe, we can't escape from doctrine. So this morning I hope to say a few words about the Trinity that will not be heretical but at the same time will not be so dry and boring as to put you to sleep.

Christianity is unique among the world's major religions in its belief in one God in three persons. For example, the Muslim religion of Islam arose at least in part in reaction against the doctrine of the Trinity. For Muslims there is only one God, and to say that Jesus is God, as we Christians do, is blasphemous. Hinduism, the ancient religion of India, believes in multiple gods and goddesses, while Buddhism, another ancient religion that began in India, doesn't believe in any God or gods at all.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity says that there is one God in three divine persons. These three divine persons are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost). They are not three Gods, but one God in three divine persons. This is a very great mystery, and human language and thought fall far short of the ability to be able to express or understand this mystery. The concept of a Triune God is more than difficult to comprehend—it's impossible to comprehend, for the simple reason that we have nothing in our world that has a corresponding existence. Human beings, the most complex creatures we know of, exist as single persons, not as unified multiples.

Now, there have been many attempts throughout the centuries to explain the Trinity.

One popular and simple illustration of the Trinity is the egg. A chicken egg consists of a shell, a yolk, and an egg white, yet it is altogether one egg. The three parts create a unified whole. The shortfall of this illustration, and others like it, is that God cannot be divided into "parts." The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one in essence, but the same cannot be said for the shell, yolk, and white of an egg.

Another illustration is said to have originated with St. Patrick. As Patrick was evangelizing the people of ancient Ireland, he explained the concept of the Trinity by using a very common plant in Ireland: the shamrock, a member of the clover family with three small, green leaves on a single stem. Patrick in his travels happened upon some Irish chieftains in a meadow. The tribal leaders were puzzled about the doctrine of the Trinity, and so Patrick bent down and plucked a shamrock. The three leaves, said Patrick, are still one plant, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are one God.

Well, the precise formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity took several hundred years for the Church to work out. And the result is what we refer to as the Nicene Creed.

Now we actually profess our faith in the Trinity every Sunday at Holy Communion and every day in the divine offices of Morning and Evening Prayer. We do so when we recite the Creeds. The Nicene Creed at Holy Communion and the Apostles' Creed at Morning and Evening Prayer. Both creeds come down to us from the early Church and were composed to express what the Church always has believed about God in the face of various heresies. These heresies popped up and were taught and argued for, and so as a result the Church and its orthodox believers and pastors had to define exactly what it is the Church believes about God.

So let's recall some of these heresies for just a moment because in doing so, we're going to have a much better understanding of the creeds and therefore of the holy Trinity itself. One of the most powerful and prevalent of the heresies in the early Church was called Arianism. Arius was a fourth-century priest who basically said that Jesus was not God but rather the greatest human being ever created. Arius and Arianism said that Jesus did not die on the cross to take away the sins of the world, but rather showed how human beings ought to live. And if we human beings simply copy how Jesus lived, then we can achieve eternal life.

Arius lived and taught in the fourth century. And his ideas, which spread like wildfire, were condemned by the first great Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. But the Arian heresy continues today in many forms both official and unofficial. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many liberal Christians are essentially modern Arians. They don't believe that Jesus is God. Rather, they believe he was simply a great man and teacher who serves as a model for us to emulate.

When confronted with this novel idea regarding Jesus, the Church and its orthodox defenders reacted by saying, this is not true. This is not what the apostles taught and is contrary to what the Gospels and the other New Testament books proclaim and record regarding Jesus.

And so, that second paragraph of both the Nicene and the Apostles' Creeds was developed to speak of the divinity, the divine nature, of Jesus. Hence in the Nicene Creed it is said that Jesus was "begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made." In other words, Jesus Christ the Son of God is not a created being like us human beings (or animals or any other created thing in nature), but rather was begotten and existed with God the Father long before any of creation was brought into being. The text of the Bible that so clearly attests to this reality is the opening of the Gospel of John. It's what is often called the Prologue to John's Gospel. And it states: "in the beginning was the Word [*ὁ λόγος*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made."

We don't find the term "Trinity" used in the Bible. However, the Bible certainly gives witness to the Trinity. For example, when Jesus is baptized, we are told in all of the Gospel accounts, that "the heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and a voice came out of heaven saying, this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." Here is a clear picture of

God the Father speaking and identifying Jesus as his son (which makes him God as well), and of God the Holy Spirit descending upon and giving witness to Jesus as God the Father's one and only beloved son.

We also have Jesus's command, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, that his disciples go forth and make other disciples of all the world and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The same phrase is echoed by the apostle Paul at the very end of his second letter to the Corinthians, when he says, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (13:14).

And we have the mysterious and provocative teaching of Jesus about the Holy Spirit and of his relationship with God the Father in John chapters 14 through 17. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus says. "No one comes to the Father but through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; from now on you know him and have seen him. Philip said to Him, Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us. Jesus said to him, Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

And, of course, there are Jesus's words in John 10:30 that caused the Jews to want to stone them to death. This is when he said, "I and the Father are one."

Now, I believe that the doctrine of the holy Trinity—that God is one God in three Persons—is one of those matters Jesus was referring to when he said, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own initiative, but whatever he hears, he will speak, and he will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify me, for he will take of mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are mine; therefore I said that he takes of mine and will disclose it to you" (John 16:12-15). In other words, the Trinity is one of those things that the Holy Spirit revealed more fully to the Church after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven.

We need to understand that there are several so-called Christian churches and denominations that do not believe in the Trinity. Examples include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons; Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarian Universalists, Christian Scientists, and the Oneness Pentecostal Churches. The rest of orthodox Christianity, and including the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Baptist Churches, believe in the Trinity as the fundamental article of the Christian faith.

One of the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God exists eternally in a divine community of love. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit live and dwell in a perfect unity and community and relationship of love with one another. And the reason that God created human beings seems to be that he wanted to be in a relationship of love with us. This is why St. John says, in the 4th chapter of his 1st Epistle, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:7, 16). This goes to the very heart of our Christian faith. God loves us and desires to be in relationship with us so much that

he actually became one of us. He became Jesus of Nazareth. Again, to quote St. John's 1st Epistle, "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which we celebrate and remember today, assures us that God in his very nature and essence is a God of love and compassion who desires more than anything to be in a loving relationship with you and me. For this, we can truly give thanks and praise. Amen.