

Basics of the Faith: Trinity
2Corinthians 13:11-13
June 7, 2020

Here is how Paul ends his second letter to the Christians in Corinth: *Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*

I think it would be pushing it to see this as a fully articulated doctrine of the Trinity. Paul is dealing with a church that is polarized by conflict. He is trying to restore them to unity. There are four imperatives here all in the present tense: *put things in order*, (which does not mean organizing the basement but rather to mend your ways or be restored); *listen to my appeal*; *agree with one another*; *live in peace*. There follows the well-known blessing that certainly hints at a Trinitarian mindset. If nothing else it reminds us of the Trinity's full participation in the work of salvation.

Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit are all named in this closing blessing, one we use in our worship all the time. We say these words without much thought about what it means, don't we?

This past week I picked up the thesis I wrote for my Doctorate at Cambridge University forty years ago for the first time in years. And was surprised that one whole section was devoted to the Trinitarian conflict in the Reformed churches in the 16th century. You know something is important when it keeps surfacing throughout the church's history.

It came up first in the 4th century at the **Council of Nicaea** (325). It was where we got the Nicene Creed. It was adopted as a strong Trinitarian confession and reads: ***We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light,***

true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.

Then in 1054 the understanding of the Trinity became a source of division that ultimately resulted in the separation of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Western Roman Catholic. And during the Reformation more ink was spilt on this subject between rival claims of orthodoxy among leading reform leaders.

Opposition to a trinitarian formula persists today. This is what gave rise to the Unitarian Church. Their web site says that they support: *the free and responsible search for truth and meaning*. They believe in a higher power and in the bible as one of the sacred texts. On the key subject of Jesus and Trinity they are silent. Belief in the Trinity of God is unavoidably connected to belief in Jesus the Christ as Saviour and Lord. God in three persons, Father Son and Spirit is at the heart of our Christian Tradition. As noble, and spiritually nurturing a Unitarian Universalist tradition might be-and it is for many folk-it departs from the Judeo/Christian centre on this central question of God.

As Christians today we are happy to recite the creed every communion service without much thought. We simply believe it! Naming God as our Father, never mind Son and Spirit, is especially difficult for many people, especially women. Their experiences of fathers make them shrink away from identifying God as Father. This is one aspect of the Trinitarian formula we don't often comment on. But let me say something about this.

For those of us who grew up in a previous generation, fathers were somewhat remote figures in the family. My father was a good man, I believe, but I can't say I had a close relationship with him. In fact, I can't remember any conversation that I had with him. He never came to my football games, or my swim meets, or my snooker tournaments. In fact, my one memory of my dad and I in close proximity was when I was in hospital after an appendix operation and learned that he was visiting me. The impending visit terrified me as a fourteen-year-old; I didn't know what I would talk to him about. I remember how glad I was when the visit was over. Most of my teen friends in

Scotland told the same story of proud, hard working dads who had a fairly distant relationship with their kids.

One of my regrets in life is the loss of my father at a young age and therefore not being able to build a relationship with him as I grew into adulthood. I remember being in a practice counseling session where my presenting issue was the fact that I had no memory of my father's voice. I don't remember how that session finished, but that void still remains with me. I sometimes visit his grave in the eastern cemetery and try to share this sense of loss and regret.

Not long after my father's death I found a new father. As a new Christian I was brought in to a relationship with God as Father, Son and Spirit, God as Trinity. I didn't understand this then and I won't pretend to understand it now. Nor do I wish to help you understand it better intellectually. The truth is that the Trinity is not an idea that can be unraveled through logic and reason. God is a mystery to us mortals. I know that in the period of modernity rational explanation was prized and we were rewarded at confirmation if we could recite the creed and explain how God is one God but exists in three persons. We devised all sorts of clever analogies to explain it. But in our postmodern world such rational explanations are no longer valid or helpful for people today. Today mystery is no longer a barrier to knowledge but rather is welcomed as a doorway into experience of the eternal. The mystery of God who is three persons in loving relationship is similarly an invitation for us to enter into an experience God's love and grace. God, in short, is beyond rational definition.

So, the good news is that this doesn't matter if we don't understand the Trinity. Christian faith is not about rational explanations; belief in God and faith in Jesus as Lord is an experience of the heart first and then mind. It is about a relationship with the living God. Think about it, when was the last time that you tried to explain the experience of falling in love. How well did you do with that? Certainly you can describe things that are true about this experience of falling in love, but you would have great difficulty trying to explain it to someone who had never experienced it. In the end it is still a mystery. To push this

further, imagine trying to write down a set of instructions for falling in love for someone who has never experienced it. Would it work? No of course it wouldn't for the very idea is ridiculous. Falling in love just happens to us whether we have read the manual or not.

Our two readings today from the New Testament, one from Paul and the other Matthew's Gospel, offer us a glimpse of the Trinitarian formula that we find in Scripture. While there is no clear biblical statement on the Trinity, the Scriptures were a source for the 4th century framers of the orthodox doctrine.

Jesus has invited his eleven disciples to a mountain in Galilee. What does it mean that some doubted? The Greek word translated "doubted", is used only one other time in the New Testament. The verb "*distazo*" describes Peter's loss of confidence as he faces the wind and water of the lake. It conveys the idea of uncertainty, puzzlement or being at a loss. The disciples do not doubt the reality of Jesus before them, but rather their uncertainty over his reception of them after their abandonment of him. How would he receive them after their failure to stand up for him was probably something of what they are feeling? So it's not intellectual doubt being expressed here so much as uncertainty. Surely for us too this experience of uncertainty is raised in worship, especially if we feel uncertain of God's response to us after we have denied our faith.

There follows the reassurance of Christ as Lord over all:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

He now has all power in heaven and earth. The devil had offered him power over earth, but now after his triumph over all the forces of evil he receives much more. Having stated his authority and power over all, he then gives them the great commission that includes the famous formula for baptism: ***in the name of the Father Son and Spirit***. We remember that at Jesus' baptism this trinity of persons was evident: the Father spoke, the Son was baptized and the Spirit

fell on him.

What this tells us is that at the heart of God as Trinity is an intimate relationship between persons. I know that those of you who read the **Shack** will have been delighted to spend time with Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu who in the novel are the Father, Son and Spirit. I found them convincing and therefore inspirational. What the author does in this novel is accommodate the mystery of the Trinity to language that we can identify with. In many ways this is the sort of accommodation that helps us experience the mystery and wonder of God in three persons.

So on this Trinity Sunday we celebrate our God as Father, Son and Spirit. The love expressed within this Trinity is one that encourages us to enter into relationship with this God and to experience God's love. The Trinity is not an invitation to definition but to an experience of God as love and grace. In other words, the focus for Paul here is that God is the source of grace, love, and community.

Finally, I would be remiss if I neglected to bring into this conversation what our study group on Wednesday nights are learning about God as three persons. It's not a study on the Trinity, but God as three persons keeps showing up in our discussion of the book of Revelation. One example: in chapter 5 we entered the throne room of God through John's vision. What did he see there? On the throne was one who couldn't be described. Also standing there was a lamb, (the Son) who had been slaughtered and who alone could open the scroll in the hands of the one on the throne. In the final scene in chapter 22 we read: The Spirit and the bride say, Come...God the Father Almighty, the Son, and the Spirit, are all involved in this final invitation to come to the waters of life. Indeed, throughout the New Testament we have seen how the Spirit of God is active in the life and work of Christians who seek to obey this final command of Jesus: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

God relates to us in three persons. This is not an abstract doctrine of scholastic scholars, who sat down in the Middle Ages to draft this secret formula of Trinity. It is at the very heart of our Christian faith

Amen

