

Sermon for 30 May 2010
Trinity Sunday

+In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

There is a joke about how rectors always try to take vacation on Trinity Sunday, and leave the task of preaching on this very complex theological concept to a curate or supply priest. I was fortunate last year that Trinity Sunday, in addition to being my first Sunday at St. Paul's, was also the bishop's visit, so I dodged a bullet, as it were. Saying much about the nature of the Most Holy Trinity is indeed a daunting prospect. It is perhaps the most complex doctrine of the Church. Even so, it is at the very core of our Christian tradition. I must confess at the outset that there is a goodly amount of theology in this morning's sermon, more than my typical sermons. I promise it won't be too painful, though. In the end, I believe that all of the theology holds an important lesson for us. So, here goes.

At the heart of the mystery of the Trinity is mission. Mission is a technical term, which comes from the Latin *mittere* meaning "to send". The Trinitarian mission, then, is God's sending of Himself. We are reminded once again of this in today's Gospel reading. Salvation was wrought by an act of sending. "God did not *send* the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The word used in that familiar passage from John is the Greek *apostello*, send out, from which we get the word apostle.

And just as the Father *sent*, or "apostled" the Son, so did both the Father and the Son together *send* the Holy Ghost. As Jesus said, and as the Apostle John recorded, "the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will *send* in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." And again, with regard to his Ascension, Jesus assured

the disciples "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

We know God by His actions, and one of God's principle activities—as we see upon reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity—is sending, "apostling". And just as God sent Himself, both as the Son and as the Holy Ghost, so does He send the Body of the Son, the Church, out to do His will. God continues to send each of us into the world to be apostles, heralds of the faith, and we must be sure to heed God's call. God may be sending some of us into far-flung mission fields. He may be sending some of us into ventures closer to home. In all events, we are an "apostolic" people, a "sent" people. It may be that God's mission field for some of us is in the home, to be a herald of the Good News to those in our families. Perhaps God is sending others into a mission in our workplaces, or

in the places where we conduct our social and leisure activities, or out into the community of Batesville, or, as I said, maybe even to some far-flung mission field. Perhaps the task is simply being a good example of the Christian faith to our neighbours, or perhaps it is engaging in some sort of social ministry, or perhaps it is telling someone we know about how much Jesus and his Church means to us. That last one can sometimes be difficult for us polite Episcopalians, but for many of us, that is God's call. In any event, just as God sent Himself, so is he sending each of us to do something for the sake of the Kingdom. It is our responsibility to listen and discern, through prayer and bible study and conversation with our fellow Christians, precisely *where* God means to send us to do the work of the Kingdom.

Now, keep this truth, that God is a "sending" God, in the back of your minds. We shall return to it. First, though, there is another truth we may

glean from the doctrine of the Trinity, namely that God is a "loving" God.

Before we delve into this truth and what it means, there is a common, totally understandable, misconception about the nature of the Trinity which needs to be dispelled. I mentioned this in passing in last week's sermon. We often think of the persons of the Trinity in terms of a sort of division of labour. That is, we assign a job description, as it were, to each person of the Trinity. Specifically, people sometimes talk about the first person of the Trinity, God the Father, as the Creator; the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, as the Redeemer; and the third person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, as the Sanctifier. This application of job descriptions as alternate names for the persons of the Trinity has become more common in recent decades as a means of avoiding masculine language for God, Father and Son being masculine nouns.

Now, whatever one thinks of inclusive language, this particular construction is in fact incorrect. It is actually a very old mistake, which the Church Fathers called "the heresy of modalism". The idea that God is triune because He acts in three distinct ways, three "modes", is not correct. Long-story short, its logical conclusion is that there are three gods acting independently of one another, rather than one God in three persons. You see how this quickly leads us away from the Christian understanding.

To the contrary, since very early times the Church has taught that each action which God performs is an action of the whole of God. That is, each person of the Trinity is involved in any work of God. Think back to the first chapter of Genesis, for example. Certainly, God the Father was involved in creating the world, but we also remember that God breathed over the deep in His act of creation. Likewise, we learn in the first chapter of Genesis

that God created by means of the "Word", and in John's Gospel, we learn that that "Word" was none other than the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, who became flesh in Jesus Christ our Lord. So, the whole of God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—was active in the creation of the heavens and the earth.

Our reading this morning from Proverbs makes much the same point. The Holy Spirit, personified as Wisdom, claims to have been involved in Creation, to be present with the Father. Hear again the words from that passage:

When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his
command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race."

To go even a bit further, not only can we not assign job descriptions to the persons of the Trinity, but the job descriptions themselves—“creator”, “redeemer”, and “sanctifier”—unnecessarily divides the work of God into discrete actions. But, in being redeemed, we become a new creation, the apostle tells us. In the redemption brought about by baptism, we are simultaneously sanctified. One could go on, but the upshot is that God actually, ultimately *does* one thing. He loves us. Creation, and redemption, and sanctification and everything else we attribute to the hand of the most glorious Trinity is an expression of God’s love. “For God so loved the world...”

And this is ultimately the meaning of the Trinity. The Trinity is not about some real or perceived division of labour. The Trinity is about the nature of love. For love to be love there needs to be an Other. Thus, for us to make any sense of the assertion that God *is* love, God cannot be

singular. As St. Augustine put it, "the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the Holy Ghost is the love they share." Even more compelling than Augustine's explanation to my mind is that of the Eastern Church Fathers, people like St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Basil. They said that the mystery of the Trinity can be captured in a word called "perichoresis". Try to remember that word: *perichoresis*. While it's ultimately untranslatable, the word suggests a dance of mutual love in which three people engage and in which the distinction between those members ceases to be apparent. The three are one because of this "dance of love". Perhaps we have felt hints of the blurring of personal distinction. Mutual love between spouses or between parents and children can have this quality. Of course, sin means that our love cannot be made perfect in this life, so all we experience are hints. "Sin has broken us apart" and so we cannot fully love.

And yet we may come to love when we abide in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Listen carefully to these words of the apostle John from his first epistle:

No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world.

Did you catch that? Let me read it again, and think back to the first part of the sermon, when I talked about "sending":

No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world.

The Holy Trinity is defined by the mutual love its members—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—have for one another. *But*, the Trinity is not an exclusive, mutual-admiration club. God's sending of the Son and of the Holy Ghost to us means that we have been

invited into the love of God, invited to abide in the love that the persons of the Trinity have for each other. We have been let into the dance of the *perichoresis*. We have been given the chance to abide in that love. That is ultimately why we are "sent out" by God. Because God sent himself into the world, and we have been brought in to the loving life of the Trinity, so we too—children of the Father, members of Christ's body, full of the Spirit—may be Christ sent out into the world and may invite others into the dance.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Amen.