

Trinity Sunday, 27 May 2018  
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity: We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see thee in thy one and eternal glory, O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Spirit livest and reignest, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Exodus 3:1-6  
Romans 8:12-17  
John 3:1-6

I keep weaving into my sermons my understanding of faith as something born of experience. Faith isn't believing in the unbelievable, just accepting a proposition or an idea because you choose to believe it. Faith is something that we come to experience as the result of relationship, of connection. We have faith in God because we have experienced divine Love. We have faith in Jesus because we have experienced the Resurrection in some way. We have faith in the Holy Spirit because we have felt the inspiration of the living force that drives us in the direction of God. We have faith, the same faith as Jesus himself had, because we have lived the Christian life, received the Body and Blood of Christ, and gone out into the world to put all this into action. Jesus put it this way when he was talking to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen."

Today we celebrate the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, the Scriptures do not make any explicit reference to the Trinity, *per se*. Yes, throughout the Hebrew Bible, and as we heard in today's lesson from Exodus, God is understood

as Father. There is also most certainly an understanding of the God's spirit as an expression of God into time and space. Hebrew prophesy talked of a messiah who would be sent to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. These were all ideas familiar to Jesus' followers and they recognised these ideas in Jesus himself and in the events of his life. Yet there was no anticipation or prophesy of God as an explicit "Trinity" into which this experience could be cast.

We get the closest at the end of Matthew's Gospel when we are, indeed, given the now common and ubiquitous formula of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," as the name in which the disciples were to go forth and baptise the Nations. Matthew does not, however, explain what he means, or what the relationship among each is, or who proceeds from whom, and most certainly does not name it as the "Trinity." It is where we make our start.

We recognise the fully formed Trinity in that formula because of what came later, because it is such an integral part of our identity and of our liturgy. We have prayed it so many times that it is just there. What is more interesting is that it made sense to those first readers and listeners and that they embraced it. The concept, as yet unformed and unnamed, was recognisable to those who first read or heard it because they had already met each of these expressions that we will eventually name as the Persons of the Trinity. They had lived the Gospel story. They had been with Jesus at his Baptism, in Galilee, at the feeding of the five thousand, on the road with him in town after town, walked in the way of the Cross, been there on Good Friday and Easter

Day, met the risen Christ, seen him depart, and received the gift of Pentecost. In and through these momentous event, they knew God as father and creator. They knew Jesus as his Son, who was sent to bring us closer to God and to each other. They had been the recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit, filled with its breath and its fire, and impelled out of the locked room and into the world. That formula of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” made sense to those earliest Christian because this is who and what they had come to know as the Godhead.

It was only natural, therefore, that they would wish to make further meaning of it; to understand it better. They began to try and puzzle it out. They knew that God is one. They also knew that God is three. God created the world, came to redeem it, and filled us with the breath of life so that we might keep cooperating with God in the unfolding of the Kingdom. They knew God had shown them each of these expressions; that each was unique. At the same time they knew they were interconnected, in relationship with each other, not three separate beings like the gods of other peoples, one in a special, deeply inter-relational way.

The Trinity, therefore, is a doctrine developed by the Church, very early on, to describe the new and exciting experience of God in which the followers of Jesus were caught up. The Trinity is an idea that makes meaning for us of the life we and our community have lead. In fact, it is perhaps the best example of the very definition of a bit of theology: it is faith seeking understanding.

Over the almost two thousand years we have travelled since that first Christian

Pentecost these questions have become matters of great debate. We have wanted to get it right; and that makes sense. At the same time, when you move from trying to describe an experience in the world of divine intervention and revelation to fashioning a precise formulation of how it all works using the tools of logic and Greek philosophy, you end up asking all kinds of questions and pursuing all kinds of lines of thought you might never have imagined. Quite rightly, I think, we have wanted to be explicit that Jesus was both human and divine. We have been clear that we identify God as the originator and creator of the world. We have decided that each person is not merely defined by what they do (creator, redeemer, sustainer), but by who they are and how they are related to each other. We have used this exploration to decide who was in and who was out. It has been in many ways divisive, but in the long run, in and through the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, it has helped us understand both God and ourselves better.

The Trinity we celebrate today is the human definition of one of the central realities of our faith. God, known and experienced as having created the world, sent his son into that world so that creation might be at one with God. Then after the definitive action in which love defeated death, God sent himself again, as Holy Spirit to impel us on our Godward journey. These three persons, aspects, expressions of God are at unity with themselves in identity and operation, and we in turn in and through our baptism and nurture in the Eucharist are at unity with each other and with this triune God. This reality, known and experienced, at its core missional, at its core about

being sent, gives us the courage and will to continue in our vocations as Christians in the world, baptised and sent out, connected with each other, loved and known, changed by what God has done for us.

In the end, therefore, it is really all about faith. As I said at the outset, not about the idea of faith as believing in the unbelievable, but about real faith, the same faith as Jesus had, the faith born of experience, experience of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Experience of God in each of these expressions, experience that has drawn us here, has made us each, uniquely individual, still one together, one body, united in Love. This is the gift of the Holy Trinity.

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Ember Day, 23 May 2018