

The Holy Trinity (May 30, 2021) “*Can You Explain It?*”

Trinity Sunday is the only date on the Church Calendar that invites us to think about a doctrine. Every other Sunday, we have set before us a narrative or two (the Gospel reading, for sure; occasionally the First Lesson relates a story) or we get a piece of correspondence from someone like St. Paul, St. Peter, St. James, or St. John. But on this day we tend to shy away from those narratives and letters to focus on something that is less concrete, more cerebral.

Today we celebrate a mystery. That word, mystery, comes from the Greek word μυστηριον (mysterion), which basically means “a secret.” In the days of the New Testament, the Greco-Roman world was saturated with what are called “mystery religions.” These were cultic groups that became focused on one of the many gods or goddesses in Greco-Roman polytheism. Commonly, such groups maintained themselves with secret rituals, especially rites of initiation. A person was expected in that culture to adhere to the imperial religion (official state worship of the emperor), and many would also follow some tribal religious practices. The mysteries offered a third alternative that supplemented the other two. These groups posed a problem for the Early Church because early Christians would not adhere to the imperial religion, which they professed put them at odds with the Lordship of Christ.

When we hear the word “mystery” today, our minds tends to run toward people like Lieutenant Columbo, Hercule Poirot, or Miss Marple. Mysteries, for us, are problems that require the expertise, the insight, the special craftiness of the detective to sort through. We (the general public, the great unwashed, the dummies) may not be able to figure out who shot Colonel Mustard in the library, so bring in the expert to solve the mystery.

Mystery is not unknown; it is unknowable. Richard Schwedes, a Lutheran Pastor serving in Tasmania recorded this exchange in which he was engaged with a recent convert. When asked to explain the Trinity, Pastor

Schwedes replied

“You've got the Father, the Son and the holy ghost. But the three are one — like a shamrock, my old priest used to say. ‘Three leaves, but one leaf.’ Now, the father sent down the son, who was love, and then when he went away, he sent down the holy spirit, who came down in the form of a...” “*You told me already - a ghost.*” “No, a dove.” “*The dove was a ghost?*” “No, the ghost was a dove. “*Let me try and summarize this: God is his son. And his son is God. But his son moonlights as a holy ghost, a holy spirit, and a dove. And they all send each other, even though they're all one and the same thing.*” “You've got it. You really could be a nun!”

When I get started on this topic, I almost always come back the Confirmand, who told me, “*I don't get it.*” Exactly.

One of my favorite comedy routines is the Abbot and Costello skit “Who's on First?” Someone wrote a similar skit on the subject of the Trinity that begins this way:

“When you come to church you need to know the key players . . . you know, the ones who are worthy of honor and praise.” “*Honor and praise huh? Well who are they?*” “O.K., now listen closely. There is one God. One God.” “*That seems easy enough. What do you call this one God?*” “This one God is called, ‘God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.’” “*Now wait just a minute. You told me that there is only one God.*” “That's right!” “*So which is it?*” “So which is what?” “*Which name do you use for this one God?*” “The name I gave you.” “*But you gave me three names.*” “That's right.” “*What's right?*” “God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.” “*So you have three Gods?*” “No, one God.” “*So which is it?*” “Which is what?” “*Father, Son or Holy Spirit?*” “Yes!” “*Yes to what?*” “That's God's name.” “*Which God?*” “Our one God.” “*Why did you give three names?*” “Because they aren't the same.” “*But you just told me there is one God. So which is it?*” “Which is what?” “*Which name is the name of your God?*” “I told you, ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’” “*But that is three.*” “Yes, but it's only

one.” [Pastor Charles Woodward]

“Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle. Love is a mystery, a crossword is a puzzle. You try to solve the puzzle, you stand in awe before a mystery.” wrote Justo Gonzalez. How do you “stand in awe before a mystery”? How do you celebrate? You step into it. You let it envelope you. You stop and listen; wait and give attention. You place yourself in a quiet room, a green meadow, a lakeside retreat (even if you can do this only in your imagination) and you ask God to reveal Himself as present.

So much of religion is just that — it’s activities designed to gain us something on the God scale. Oh, we’re hardly ever that crass about it; nobody I know says *“I’m doing this to earn brownie points with God.”* But all too often we do things with the idea, *“God’s gonna like this.”*

There was a message on the church answering machine years ago from a woman who identified herself as someone I had “christened” (I have never broken a bottle of champagne over anyone’s head at any time) and I did not recognize her name. She asked that I call her (but neglected to leave her number, so that wasn’t going to happen). Then she went on to tell me about how she hoped God would let her into heaven, because she had tried so hard to the good things, and had indeed done many good things. I really do wish I could have contacted this woman, because her foundation is nothing but sand. For many people, this woman represents religion.

You know what? God does delight in us. Not because of what we do, but because of what He makes us to be. In His loving us, God fashions us into His beloved. This is also a mystery. Why would God love us? Sometimes we think: “It must be because we’re so lovable.” Look at the person next to you; did you ever see such a smile, such a profile, such radiance? Take a good, hard look now at the person who is looking at you (are they wincing?) We know that we are not the epitomes of beauty, grace and style — maybe before we reached the age of five we were cute. Then

So why does God love us? Jesus affirms that He does: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** We call that “the heart of the Gospel.” . . . why is it true?

Part of our problem here is our image of God. *“Your God is too small.”* warned J.B. Phillips in a book by that title. It’s true that we leave God in the box, or in our pockets, or in the Bible — and never experience the wonder of His glory. As the line from Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera “HMS Pinafore” echoes: *“Never? Yes, never! What never? Well, hardly ever.”*

If you think God is at all interested in your performance, you need to be assured He is not. He is interested in you. He wants to be with you. He wants you to be with Him. God loves you because that what God is: ***“God is love.”*** You know that; have you experienced that? For a lot of us this loving God is not very close. He is distant, aloof, even unknown.

Paul tells us: ***“When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . .”*** “Abba” . . . “Daddy” — He bids us to come near and nestle in His love.

Contrast that with the vision Isaiah had in today’s First Lesson. Many of us may think that Isaiah’s reaction would be ours: ***“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”*** Please note how quickly God dispels Isaiah’s anxiety; the seraph brings the instrument of healing to make Isaiah’s lips clean.

This is the God we worship. We cannot explain the mystery of the *“one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity”* — we can scarcely enunciate it. That is why we give it this focus — to remind ourselves how totally “other” God is. He is not “the big man upstairs” — He is this mystery *“The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten;*

*the Son was neither made nor created,
but was alone begotten of the Father;
the Spirit was neither made nor created,*

*but is proceeding from the Father and the Son.
Thus there is one Father, not three fathers;
one Son, not three sons;
one Holy Spirit, not three spirits.
And in this Trinity,
no one is before or after, greater or less than the other; but all three
persons are in themselves,
coeternal and coequal;
and so we must worship the Trinity in unity
and the one God in three persons.” [Athanasian Creed]*

And with spinning heads we call Him “Papa.”

Amen.