

Trinity Sunday, Year A  
June 19, 2011 ~ Matthew 28:16-20  
Fr. Jim Cook.

## *“Three Equals One? Only in the Church!”*

**G**od is too big for the human brain to comprehend. But that hasn't stopped us from trying. But no matter how much we try, we're never really successful. Even our religious and liturgical language is rarely ever up to the task, and misunderstanding is so easy.

A young woman visited the United States from overseas. On Sunday, her hosts took her to church with them. She watched and listened carefully. Later, she asked her hosts, “Why didn't you pray for the West Coast?” “What do you mean?” they asked. “Well, several times, you prayed in name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the whole East Coast. But you never prayed for the West Coast.”

Nevertheless, we are a tenacious bunch, and, as Christians, we say a lot of things about God. What we say about God is called theology, literally “god words.”

For example, some of the things we say about God might include:

- God existed before all of the created order.
- God is more powerful than anything in the created order.
- God exists in all places, at all times.

Now, I've just listed only three of any number of things we might say about God, but just try to wrap your mind around any one of them. It's tough, isn't it? Well, often, when we fail to understand God, we make jokes about it, like:

“Can God make a rock so big that even God can't pick it up?”

However, not only do we make jokes about things we can't understand, in the Church we make a day of it. Today is the Feast Day of the Holy Trinity, or, more simply, Trinity Sunday. The doctrine of the Trinity is, at the same time, one of the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian Church, and one of the most difficult to describe. It's enigmatic, to say the least.

But on Trinity Sunday, we embrace the enigma. We gaze into the abyss and take notes. And on this first Sunday after the Pentecost, we assert that God is simultaneously three persons in one. Not three persons that *seem* like one. Nor one person with three *aspects*. Rather, on this day, we assert something that is physically impossible: that Three equals One, and One equals Three. Huh?

All of which reminds me of a bit from the stand-up routine of a young Bill Cosby. His young daughter came home from school one day, proudly announcing that she has learned addition. The family was delighted, and asked for an example. "Two plus two equals four," the child declared. The family praised her until she finally asked her parents what a "two" was.

Too often, that's us when it comes to trying to define the Trinity — we can come up with a description, but we're not entirely sure what it means. Nevertheless, that hasn't stopped us, over the years, from taking the things that some very smart people have said about the Trinity, and memorializing them in writing. Certainly, our Book of Common Prayer is filled with all sorts of statements about God. Even the Nicene Creed, which we'll recite in a few minutes, is a very early statement about what we believed about God.

But therein lies the problem. Whenever we start taking things that we *say* we believe about God, and start writing them down, sooner or later, someone is going to confuse the writing, the statement, with what it's pointing to. That is, we confuse the *description* of God, with God himself. And so keenly have we sometimes embraced one particular description of God, that blood has almost literally been shed when someone suggested we change it.

Let me give you a very brief example. A very early version of the Nicene Creed said this about the Holy Spirit: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father." However, in 1014 C.E., the Bishop of Rome decided to add three words to this statement about the Holy Spirit, to wit, that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." The negative response to this in some quarters was so strong that, by 1054 C.E., the Christian Church was quite literally split in two halves.

What do we learn from that? Obviously, we learn that words matter. The words we employ in worship and faith are important. However, too often, we forget that words are finite, but God is infinite. We forget that, while words may provide us with an image or description of God — a snapshot of God, if you will — the words are

not God. They merely reflect a truth about God that has been experienced, by one person, or by one community of people, at one point in time. And while the words are important, they shouldn't be chiseled in stone because, who knows when we'll learn something new about God that challenges some of the things we once held onto very dearly.

Although Christians have long understood how limiting words can be, I think it's been only during the last few centuries that we've been exploring other words for God. For example, at various times and in various places, people have experimented with replacing "God the Father" with "God the Mother," or "God the Parent," or even "God the Creator." Greek words have been employed, such as *sophia*, *logos*, and *spiritus*. Parallel words, such as "creator," "redeemer," and "sustainer" have been used. Even some metaphysical words have been tried, such as "energy," "wisdom," "light," and "justice."

However off-putting some of this may be, what I find attractive and exciting about these new approaches, is that it shows us just how much people are still trying to know and understand God. People are trying to put their experiences of God into words, into accurate and meaningful descriptions. However, what I find worrisome about all this, is the all-too-human tendency to try and fine a one-size-fits-all name or description for God. It won't work! It always has been, and always will be, impossible to fully comprehend God. And this is why, I think, the ancient Hebrew simply refused to name God, because they understood the limits of their language.

So, where do we go from here?

Well, first off, I think we need to remember that the point of Christianity has *never* been to try and figure out God by reading or learning about him. Rather, the point has been to *experience* the presence of God. How do we do that? How do finite human beings experience an infinite God? How, indeed?

I am told that, soon after one young man was ordained to the priesthood, his mentor said, "I challenge you to preach on the Trinity without using the word 'mystery.'" He could not, for indeed, the whole concept of the Trinity is the description of an *experience* of God. It is *not* a scientific description of God, for, as I said at the outset, God is too big for the human mind to understand. Therefore, the Trinity always has been, and always will remain, a mystery.

The best thing you might try, is something I haven't done in a very long time. When I was in college, two friends and I drove straight through from San Antonio, Texas to Three Rivers, Michigan to visit a Benedictine monastery. During the middle of one night, we were driving through the Smoky Mountains and decided to stop at a scenic overlook. Though it was summer, it was cold that high in the mountains, so we lay across the hood of our car, and gazed into the night sky. What we saw were more stars than we had ever seen before. We saw stars and constellations, moons and meteors, planets and even the Milky Way. What we felt was awe, for we had a sense that we were looking at the face of God.

However, as much as we *could* see, there was so much more that we *couldn't* see. There were countless stars and planets, galaxies and suns, whose light hadn't yet reached the earth. Trinity Sunday reminds us that God is like that. What we see of God, what we experience of God, what we understand of God, is only a small fraction of the totality of God. So much of God is hidden from our eyes. Now we see in part; now we know in part.

There is, within all human beings, a small part and a large part. The small part is our finite structure, our limited selves. But the large part is our capacity to dream, and imagine, and wonder. And so much of the mystery of God the Holy Trinity is hidden in our dreams and imaginings. But when we probe into that mystery, what we will likely find is the goodness, and love, and grace of our God who – though he cannot be fully known – yet, on a good day, he can certainly be glimpsed. Amen.