

## RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH

May 30, 2010, Trinity Sunday  
John 16:12-15; Romans 5:1-5

*'So... Three Is One?'*

Today is Trinity Sunday, an invitation to remember the central mystery of Christian faith: God beyond us: Creator of the Universe; God with us: Jesus Christ, Friend and Saviour; God working through us: the Spirit poured out, present with us. *Holy, holy, holy, blessed trinity.*

But I remember a colleague who called this day 'a curious liturgical feast' and others who lament that this is the one day of our worship year when we 'celebrate' doctrine, not biblical story, not Jesus' teachings or the Psalmist's wisdom, but an intellectual concept, a teaching of the church, rather than a story of human life encountering God's wonder or Jesus' parables.

It's been called a great hinge, this day of the Trinity. It stands between and joins the two halves of the Church year: the first half focusing on the life of Christ, the second on the church. But while some call it a great hinge, others think of it as a great pain!

Trinity is not a word that occurs in Scripture, though our readings call us to reflect on God as Three in One: 'Creator, Christ and Spirit'. Still, we need to remember that 'Trinity' mattered a great deal to many in Christian history. 'Trinity' is the church's answer to human questions and about the nature of God, about the love and presence of the God people experienced in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit: powerful, present, loving, not a far-away clock-maker who set things ticking, then watched.

Although this mystery of God revealed in three ways is the core belief of Christianity, many struggle to explain it. Monotheistic students do back-flips in theological studies explaining why such a belief doesn't make them 'polytheistic'. Some use water to witness to God's oneness: water exists on earth as gas, liquid, solid. Three forms, one substance. Get it?

But throughout history voices have asked: "How can God be three and one at the same time?" What others would call impossible we Christians would call 'paradox': a statement that seems to contradict itself, yet expresses a truth, such as 'Less is more'.

Within Christian community, many regard the doctrine of the Trinity as archaic, obsolete, patriarchal. Some feel we need to abandon Trinitarian language for something less ... 'musty'. Some opt to ignore the Father-Son relationship and refer to functions of the divine: Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. Others are incensed that Christians are willing to tinker with the ancient language of the faith with which we baptize.

Yet, what is the ancient language? What about trying to understand Trinity in terms of Lover, Beloved, Love? Lover: God, who so loved the world; Beloved: at Jesus' baptism, God calls Jesus 'My Beloved'. Love: John's Gospel tells us that God is Spirit and God is

Love. Lover, Beloved, Love. I wonder how our faith might have evolved had that Trinitarian 'formula' been used as much as 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.

That question is more legitimate than it might seem. In Christian history, the Trinitarian description 'Lover, Beloved, Love' came from St. Augustine who suggested it over 1600 years ago and used it in his teaching, writing, preaching on the Trinity.

At Pentecost, the power of God's Spirit, promised by Jesus, came like flames dancing on people's heads. Then, in some mysterious way, a band of scared, confused people witnessed to the mystery of God, known through Jesus Christ.

As we follow along new paths and into new situations, our understanding of God will deepen. However, we do know that at the heart of God is a mystery; that somehow God is One, perfect in unity, complete in wisdom and grace, and somehow God is also Three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Lover, Beloved, Love. We believe that God created and continues to create order out of chaos; that God sent Jesus into the world, that God suffers. We believe that God, through the Spirit, meets us where we are, giving us power, making us witnesses to God's mysterious activity and nature, sending us to proclaim these mysteries.

And Trinitarian faith is always about God's deep and steadfast love for all of us, and the world.

Thinking about relationship may be the key to understanding Trinity. John and the epistle to the Romans declare a way of thinking about God as 'Three-in-one'. Relationship. Our reading from the Gospel of John comes at the end of what is called Jesus' farewell discourse, with its promise of a new age of the Spirit: the Spirit of Truth will come to guide you into all the truth. Paul's epistle to the Romans assures us that God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit. Relationship.

What does that mean today?

*To live with respect in creation:* In 1994 the United Church's General Council debated long and hard about adding that phrase to the Affirmation of Faith some call 'The New Creed'. Ultimately, the Church added the words, to underscore the human role as created and co-creators, able to participate in God's ongoing work to preserve God's creation, to be 'stewards of life's continuity on earth'.

Profound spiritual awareness is part of that: seeing ourselves, in the language of the Trinity, as servants and partners of the Creator and Saviour, helped by the Spirit's power. Christians believe that our efforts on behalf of the planet are not ours alone, that the source and power of life in the universe is working in and through us for the well-being of all creation, including our tiny bit of it. 'We can help', we say. Trinity says: 'You are helped'.

Finding new ways to think about the Trinity – God with us – is perhaps more important now than ever. Theologians centred in God's creation suggest we need to find a new way of

looking at the earth, one in which human beings are no longer seen as rulers, as crown, as goal, and begin to identify ourselves with the suffering of other species, with the earth itself. As people watch the devastating impact of drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico, perhaps that identification 'with' rather than 'over' has become stronger, more urgent.

God calls human beings to care, to become instruments of divine grace, able, in the Spirit's power, to build a different relationship with our earth. Listen to these words from the United Church's *A Song of Faith*:

"Finding ourselves in a world of beauty and mystery,  
of living things, diverse and interdependent,  
of complex patterns of growth and evolution,  
of subatomic particles and cosmic swirls,  
we sing of God the Creator  
the Maker and Source of all that is.. "

Today, science and religion find themselves in increasing dialogue. At the outer limits of its research, science sees itself as raising ethical and religious questions. And theologians turn to science for information and guidance.

Theologian Sallie McFague quotes biologist-paleontologist Stephen Gould, as asking human beings to "re-centre ourselves 'as the stewards of life's continuity on earth.'" She continues: "To be stewards of life's continuity on earth and partners with God in solidarity with the oppressed is an awesome vocation, a far higher status than being a little lower than the angels or subject of a divine king, or even the goal of evolutionary history."<sup>1</sup>

The Trinity and Trinitarian language are, at their best, a powerful invitation to think deeply – and anew – about God, our relationship with God and one another and all creation. Maybe that's why great mystics, theologians and prophetic writers in Christian history have spent much time meditating upon the Trinity.

On this Trinity Sunday, may we see ourselves as those who embody one God in community. May we learn to live and serve in that community.

Let us conclude with words from St. Patrick:

*I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity,  
by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.*

*I bind unto myself today the virtues of the star-lit heaven,  
the glorious sun's life-giving ray;  
the whiteness of the moon at even,  
the flashing of the lightening free,  
the whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,  
the stable earth, the deep salt sea,  
around the old eternal rocks.*

*I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity.... Amen.*

Lillian Perigoe

1. In *Human Beings, Embodiment, and Our Home the Earth*, p. 168.