

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

June 3, 2007

Trinity Sunday C – 2007

In the Name of our One ever creating, loving and sustaining God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the Sunday when those parishes that still have curates get to hear them preach. It is Trinity Sunday when we wrap up the story – Creation, the Incarnation, the ministry, death resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the imparting of the Holy Spirit. We end by contemplating that unique Christian twist to monotheism – one God, yet a Triune God with three distinct manifestations. It is a religious doctrine which gives us a vocabulary to talk about God based on our common experiences of God and our understanding. Religious doctrines take time to come into being; the doctrine of the Trinity took over 300 years to evolve. No wonder rectors let the curates preach on this Sunday!

How do we start to describe the unknowable – the tremendous mystery- the *misterium tremendum* – that is how Christians experience the one living God? I remember a story I read somewhere about a young couple who brought home their new infant. Their three year old insisted that she be allowed to be alone with the baby with the door closed. The parents were a bit apprehensive but remembered that they had installed one of those listening devices in the baby's room. They watched as the baby's 3 year old sibling went in to see the baby and they listened in . "Quick," the 3 year old said, "Tell me what God looks like; I've almost forgotten." I don't know how factual that story is, but it contains enough truth that I have remembered it. We all want to see God and know what God looks like.

How we conceive of God is probably a function of many things – our religious background, our culture, what we learned as children in our families, our religious education and biblical literacy, our life experiences and, perhaps most importantly, our spiritual prayer life throughout our lives. Like most other things in life, at some point our spiritual life stops happening by itself and we have to take charge and assume responsibility for it.

If I asked you to draw a picture of God, what would you draw? Really, think about it for a while. I have done this with groups sometimes. You'd be surprised what shows up. Our cultures and early training give us images and vocabularies to use in considering God. This is good and necessary, but left to itself can be limiting. We once asked our dear and recently deceased 84 year old friend Dot if she thought God was a man. She thought a while and said, "Why, yes, God is definitely male", probably just as the good nuns told her back in the 1930s.

Reason also gives us some tools to consider the question. This too is good but it also has its drawbacks. Thomas Jefferson once rewrote the Bible. He smoothed out the contradictions and took out all the miracles and other things he considered irrational. It was thus completely comprehensible. I haven't read it and I should someday. My guess is that it looks very much like Thomas Jefferson – a very bright and compelling product of the early 19th century. I think if we tried the same project today, it would look very much like us. There is a reason why the Bible, which spans 3000 years of history and many cultures, gives us many images of God.

Tradition and Scripture help us. They show us how others throughout the centuries have wrestled with the concept of God. Krister Stendahl, the former Bishop of the Church of Sweden, theologian and former dean of Harvard Divinity School, once

wrote about three distinct symbols or paradigms of the idea of God that are found in Christianity.

One is God like the one Dot learned about in Sunday school - white haired man on the throne of judgment. God is judge and everything circles around God's judgment and sin and forgiveness and the cross. This is a prominent theme in the Western Church, helped no doubt by Augustine and the doctrine of original sin. It is especially prevalent in Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions.

Then there is God as lord and king. And that has to do with God as king and we as subjects. It is about hierarchy and rules and order and covenants and obedience. There are strong Old Testament threads here, especially Levitical and Davidic. This image of God is common in many Jewish and Calvinist traditions. It is no accident that many fundamentalist churches are named things like Cathedral of the King or that when the Southern Baptist Convention was taken over by fundamentalists they forced women out of the pulpit.

Then there is the image of God as found in John's Gospel; it is one about life and light and streams of living water. It is about a God that sends his Son not to judge but that we may have life and have it more abundantly. Its focus is primarily on the human family and the Christian community. This paradigm of the image and nature of God is found especially in Eastern Christianity.

So where does that leave us today? Within our Episcopal and Anglican traditions, we find all three strands – not infrequently within the same parish or even the same person (and that includes me)! That may explain why we understand one another so well and get along together – or not! Well, it also probably explains our tradition of

openness and broad consensus and a great focus not so much on reason or doctrine but on the transcendence of worship and prayer in community.

Our readings for today give us some images of God. Our Old Testament reading from Proverbs shows an ancient understanding of God as a God of community and intimacy: a social God that joined with Wisdom in Creation and leaves that wisdom in the world to bring us into communion with God. When I read these types of passages from Proverbs I can almost see a God who wants to dance with us. Our reading from Romans points again to a God who pours out his desire for connection and intimacy with us through the Person of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of us all through the Holy Spirit.

Finally our Gospel lesson from John shows God's relationship with us is truly intimate in that it is living and dynamic. Like all intimate relationships it involves change and trust and keeping close enough to communicate. Like any relationship such as our marriages and other human bonds of affection, we live together and change and evolve over time yet the relationship remains because of the communication and mutual adaptation. It is not so much a march through time as it is a dance through time where we have to live in the moment totally trusting in the other. The unity of God stems from the complete uniqueness of God; the Trinity is about God's life with us and ours with God and our life with each other.

This is about the best I can do this Trinity Sunday. Perhaps we don't have to have certainty of knowledge of God's nature so long as we can trust in God and accept God's offer to dance. Amen