

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday May 30, 2010

TRINITY SUNDAY 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the Name of our one living God who creates abundantly, loves extravagantly and sustains eternally: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the last Sunday of the heavy theological lifting we do each year following Easter. Each year during Easter season we read a lot of John, who can be as dense as kryptonite! But he makes clear the meaning and importance of Easter that sheds light on the other three Gospels. Next week we get to drop John and move on and get back into Luke's well told narrative of what Jesus said and did. But we are not there yet – we are left with the Church calendar's biggest gift – Trinity Sunday. Rectors of big city parishes usually let the curate preach on this. No such luck here! I'm not going to explain it today since God is bigger than we can even imagine. I think the concept of the Trinity is best experienced than explained.

As any self-respecting Jehovah's Witness can tell you, the doctrine of the Trinity – the core central belief of the Christian faith – is nowhere to be found in the Bible. And that is correct! It emerged as the Bible itself did – slowly over time as a people tried to make sense of God and God's workings in different times and in different situations. Like the Bible itself, the doctrine of the Trinity is the result of the Holy Spirit informing a community as it underwent trials and did a lot of questioning and reflecting on what their experiences say about God.

Our first reading from the Book of Proverbs gives us a good introduction. We don't know where the Book of Proverbs came from. It is most likely a collection of ancient wisdom sayings and poems from a variety of ages and cultures that got its final edit by Jewish scribes during or shortly after the Babylonian captivity. Here Wisdom is portrayed as a female figure that is an

emanation from God who dances joyfully with God in and through Creation as it occurs. She is portrayed as an intimate of God who reaches out to humans to inform and enlighten them. She points to Creation itself as a source of knowledge about God and offers herself as a guide to those willing to be led. She points to the continuing creative presence of God in Creation and invites us to look and rejoice with her as God continues God's creative work.

In a lot of current worship services I occasionally see on television, I note that often it seems to be either all "Father God" this and "Father God" that or else it is all "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus" all the time. I think that points to how the concept of the Trinity broadens our idea of God and keeps it centered on God. The Trinity maintains our vision of God as being both transcendent yet also present in our own lives and world.

Monotheism doesn't come easily to humans. Ancient religions always seemed to have a duality about them (creative god/destructive god; caring god/punishing god; or a Parthenon of gods who had ordering and disordering powers). The Jews are unique among ancient peoples to arrive at this and the Bible shows that it took them a long time with plenty of relapses to arrive there. They reached a concept of a caring God but whose steadfast love is conditional upon the covenant being kept. Even today we find ourselves vacillating between a destructive, vengeful God of Wrath and a loving God of protection and caring.

I know that the doctrine of the Trinity is not topmost on your list of daily concerns and I know it doesn't move people like the stories of Jesus' life and teachings. For daily life it seems to most people probably to be irrelevant – something a few people in seminaries talk about. But I do think it is important if we want to stay centered and to have the ability to move forward through changing times.

Our Gospel lesson from John helps us here, I think, if we put it back into context. In the verses just preceding today's lesson, Jesus tells the disciples that it is to their advantage that He returns to the Father in order that the Advocate – the Spirit – may come. When the Advo-

cate comes, Jesus tells them, He will prove the world wrong about three things: about sin, about righteousness and about judgment. Jesus goes on: “About sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.” Here I think these words are not addressed to just the original disciples but to all followers of Jesus in all ages and places.

Jesus was wrongly convicted as a blasphemer against God and an enemy of the State by the Temple authorities and the Roman Governor. He angered the Temple because he challenged both their unthinking use of the Law (e.g. their prohibition of healing on the Sabbath) and their claimed monopoly on God’s forgiveness. He threatened Rome because he preached both justice and compassion. He was killed as a scapegoat to protect those in power. In short, they substituted their judgment for God’s while presenting it as God’s judgment. John shows that it takes God the Son being unjustly judged and killed by worldly authorities and the Father’s judgment on their judgment on Easter morning to expose and convict the world’s often idolatrous judging.

John, more than the other Gospel writers, makes clear that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus shows God to be a God of love and compassion. It is a step beyond the Jewish covenant and points to a different relationship with God.

Jesus leaves the disciples and us with the assurance that Jesus still has many things to say to us.- things that we cannot hear then. As the world and we journey forward into our unknown future, Jesus assures us that we will hear his words of truth as we face uncertainty and confusion.

It is still tempting to substitute our own judgments for those of God. And call them God’s. It is still tempting to use the Bible literally rather than challenge old truths with new knowledge or new conditions. It is still tempting to use the Bible as a weapon and call on a God of wrath and damnation rather than listening in community for the Spirit of truth who informs us what our God of love and compassion would have us decide and do.

This is what a lot of conflict going on in our society and church is all about.

It seems that we need the fullness of the Triune God – all three Persons in God – to keep us grounded to proceed into our future and trust. A Triune God that reminds us of the enormity of God’s creative, redemptive and sustaining powers. Ed Browning, I am told, was nominated by some from this parish as a candidate for Presiding Bishop while he was Bishop of Hawai’i (having succeeded Bishop Lani Hanchett, the former rector of this parish). He won and served as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1985 – 1997. It was a difficult period when the country and the church started to really deal with many of the issues now referred to as the “culture wars”. At his installation at National Cathedral Ed frankly acknowledged the diversity of views that existed on many issues. He said, “I may agree with one [opinion] but will respect both. Unity will be maintained not because we agree on everything but because – hopefully – we will leave judgment up to God.”

Bishop Browning wisely advised that we not call our judgments God’s judgments but to wait to discern together in communion with one another the spirit of truth that the Holy Spirit will impart to us . Meanwhile, we should continue to follow follow Jesus’ New Commandment: “that we love one another as He loved us.” These are words of advice that the world, this nation and this church need to be reminded of.

On the little side altar over there under Auntie Marion’s plumeria stained glass window there is a copy of a Russian icon representing the Holy Trinity. The three Persons are seated on three sides of a square table with food in front of them. They are contentedly at rest and peace with one another. The fourth side of the table is unoccupied and is in front of the viewer. They look out at the viewer in a manner that invites us to enter into their company and sit at the empty place. It is what Jesus was all about and what he invites us into –into the very life of a loving Triune God.

Amen.