

Trifling with the Trinity

John 16:12-15

The Feast of the Holy Trinity\ Year C

May 30, 2010

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.

Long before the advent of the television or radio even, the world entertained itself through stories. A traveler, stopping for the night outside of ancient Athens, would more often than not while a way the evening listening to some poet recite the epics of Homer. Around the dying embers of the fire, he would hear the tales of Agamemnon, of Paris and Helen of Troy, of Odysseus rescuing sheep from a Cyclops. He would rejoice in the exploits of heroes and heroines and nod knowingly at the capricious gods and goddesses who were far too human in their passions for comfort. While Homer's epics were certainly entertaining, they also served another purpose. For you see, in the ancient world, stories were meant as instruction. They were the avenues by which wisdom was passed down. One of the truly great experts at this was a Greek slave by the name of Aesop.

Born in 655 BC, Aesop was renown for making statements that could be appreciated in any time or place. Statements such as "It is to easy to be brave from a safe distance", "We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great one's to public office" and my personal favorite "What a splendid head, yet no brain". But by far, it is Aesop's fables with which we are most familiar- the story of the Lion who spares the mouse's life only to have the mouse pay him back in return. Or the fable entitled "The Bundle of Sticks" which tells of a wise farmer who had a rather quarrelsome family. The farmer tries in vain to counsel his family to greater cooperation and harmony so that as a group they can be more successful. He finally gets so tired of the disruption that their bickering is causing that he ties a number of small sticks together into a tight bundle and then calls the family together. Each one is commanded, in turn, to take up the bundle and break it in two. Of course, no one, is able to accomplish the task. The farmer then unties the bundle and gives individual sticks to his family to break, a feat they are able to accomplish with considerably more success. The point of Aesop's fable seems to be that individually we can easily "break" but together we are strong and able to embody that for which we are born. There is strength in unity, in community. Community isn't just some nice concept. It is both an ideal and a practical reality to be lived.

Which brings us around to what today's all about. You know most of the holidays of the Christian year focus on events: Christmas concentrates on Christ's birth, Good Friday on Christ's death, Easter on his resurrection. The feast of Christ's ascension being fairly self-explanatory. The festival we celebrate today focuses less on an event than on a reality, on an idea, on a relationship, on a, well, community. Today we celebrate the ancient doctrine of the Holy Trinity. We celebrate the belief that God is somehow three and yet one, somehow one and yet three. We affirm that God is not some white bearded Zeus-like figure enthroned on a sacred mountain anymore than God is a cow wondering the streets of Calcutta. But that God is by definition "Father, Son

and Holy Spirit”. God is a community of three persons who, as our opening hymn states, cooperate perfectly to give us peace, love and truth. How the Church reached this conclusion is as complex a story as the day is long. Suffice it to say, it didn’t happen over night and it was by no stretch of the imagination an easy process. But then when you are trying to define the nature of God, it hardly seems that the process could be. After all, how do you define God who is without limit and beyond any hope of our complete comprehension. How do you talk about something in which ultimately the words we use have to fail? For us, discussing the nature of God is roughly the same as an ant perched on a flower petal discussing what makes a human being, a human being. What makes us human is simply beyond the ability of the ant’s mind to comprehend, just like God is beyond the ability our own minds to comprehend, though that stops neither the ants or us from trying.

So how is it that God is three and yet one, one and yet three. Why does God need three names. How does God exist in three forms? You would think that the Scriptures would help us answer this question? But in fact, the biblical writers are wrestling with the mystery as much as you and I are. They even compound the problem, by making it sound as if the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit operate independently from each other. Take for example the sixteenth chapter of John from which this morning’s gospel reading is drawn. The disciples and Jesus are gathered in the upper room for the Last Supper. And Jesus, fully aware that the horrors of a cross await on the horizon, is trying to say good bye to his friends. As with most farewells, He has so much to say and so little time in which to say it. “I am on my way to the One who sent me” Jesus tells them. “You see, it’s better for you that I leave. If I don’t go, the Advocate won’t come. But if I go, I’ll send him to you. Jesus pauses and then looks at them beseechingly in the eye, and he continues, his voice now tinged with both sadness and hope “I still have many things to tell you,” he says, “but you can’t handle them now. When the Advocate comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won’t draw attention to himself but he will help make sense out of what is about to happen, and indeed out of all that I have done and said.” He finishes off with the rather cryptic saying that “everything the Father has is also mine. That’s why I’ve said “He will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

I don’t know about you but there is awful lot of comings and goings and “whose on first” happening in Jesus’ fireside chat. If the Father is God then How can Jesus have everything the Father has without being God as well . He can’t. And so if Jesus is God and the Father is God then how can God also be God’s Son. Is your head staring to hurt yet? And you know where does the Holy Spirit come into all of this? Is he the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus or something else all together. And if the Holy Spirit is God then why does He need God to send him? And if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as we in fact believe, are all one God then why do they seem to enter and exit at different times like some sort of divine cavalcade with costume changes. The whole affair is not only perplexing and confusing but downright mentally exhausting for those of us who live lives (as most of do) based on some semblance of logic.

But then again obeying a human construction of logic was never God’s forte.

After all this is the God who dies and doesn't stay dead much to the dismay of some very intelligent people. This is a God who turns an instrument of torture into a tree of salvation. Who calls the foolish wise and the wise foolish. Who doesn't give us what we deserve, even though we may deserve it. We have to admit if our logic ruled the universe, then our punishments would fit our crimes, rather than our crimes, our sins, being answered with forgiveness and redemption.

We can trifle with the doctrine of the Trinity all we want but in the end, to be perfectly frank, there is nothing logical about it. It doesn't make sense. But for all of it's ability to confound us, it contains the haunting ring of eternal truth straining at the edges of human words. The truth that God somehow is community, that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are an in-pouring and outpouring of love and light endlessly dancing together. And in their dance, we glimpse that God is never distant or alone. We see that God is both beginning and end, source of mind and Body, that He is the heart of all belonging in the countless ways that we belong, in our loyal friendships, in our loving homes, in our common mind and shared agreements and most importantly in the oneness of us gathered here to share the one loaf, the one cup, the one life of God.

So who is God? What is God's nature? How is God three yet one, one yet three? For all of our waxing and waning on the topic, we haven't gotten much closer. But let's face it, the only easier question would be "what is the sound one hand clapping" or "what did you look like before your parents were born". Perhaps in the end the answer is less a philosophical or theological formula than an experience. We should take our cue from the prophet Isaiah who spends absolutely no time constructing elaborate explanations of God, but simply talks about his divine encounter- God's robe filling the temple to point of drowning people in fabric, six-winged seraphs with sleepless eyes fluttering about. He goes only as far as language will take him, as the experience will carry him. The Book of Revelation gives it a try too- with it's strange melding of lions and lambs and a description of glassy seas and a throne surrounded by a rainbow which looks like an emerald. Both John and Isaiah in their own way try to give us a glimpse of the mystery, of the un-describable, of something so utterly beyond them and us, that the best move may have been to simply stay silent. God is not something to be analyzed but experienced. In the end, perhaps the first step to understanding God, to understanding the Trinity, is experiencing God in the way that God experiences God, in the embrace of true community.