

Standing Under The Trinity
Deuteronomy 6:1-10; Matthew 28:16-20
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
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Sunday, June 7, 2009

"I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ His only Son Our Lord. I believe in the Holy Ghost."

"I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost."

These liturgical expressions contain the formula for the foundation of our Christian faith: the trinity or three persons in one God. The trinity is the uniquely Christian answer to the question, *"Who is God?"*

I read that somewhere there is a man who comes to church only once a year, on Trinity Sunday, because he gets a big kick out of watching the preacher get so confused in his attempt to explain the Trinity. But truth be told, you can't explain the Trinity because it's an unsolvable mystery.

St. Augustine, while puzzling over the Trinity, was walking along the beach one day when he saw a young boy with a bucket running back and forth to pour water in a little hole. Augustine asked, *"What are you doing?"* The boy replied, *"I'm trying to put that ocean into this hole."* Right then and there Augustine realized he was trying to squeeze the infinite God into his finite mind.

Get the picture? The Trinity is beyond our comprehension.

But when you think about it doesn't that make sense?

Who can claim to understand God?

If you could put God under a microscope, God wouldn't be God any more. That's why I didn't have the audacity to title this sermon *"Understanding the Trinity."* You can't understand the Trinity, but you can stand under the Trinity and come to realize if we enter into the mystery of our Triune God, that is, three persons in one God, we can experience intimacy with God and each other. And so, today you are invited to Stand Under the Trinity.

Let's begin with this, where does the doctrine (or teaching) of the Trinity come from?

The scriptures.

The Church Fathers didn't invent this concept out of thin air. The basis for this uniquely Christian teaching is found in one of the oldest creeds of the faith, found in the book of Deuteronomy. "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one.*"

Centuries earlier the Hebrews were given the revelation God is one. Their pagan neighbors still believed there were many gods. But the people of the Book were liberated from having to cope with multiple gods, both good and bad, and freed to love and trust the one true God. The historical fact that the tiny insignificant tribes of Israel were singled out for this unique blessing is in itself a mystery, giving rise to the doggerel, "*How odd of God to choose the Jews.*" But for whatever reason, the Jews were chosen to bear witness to the one true God.

Remember the first commandment? "*I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me.*" Given this new commandment the Hebrews could no longer be dominated by pagan superstitions. Everything they believed was centered in the One True God who freed them from anything keeping them from enjoying God forever.

It was into this faith Jesus was born and as a boy Jesus was taught that foundational teaching: "*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one.*"

So then, how do we make the jump from the One God to the Three-in-One God?

In our attempt to get a grasp of this unfolding and expanding belief process lets try to see it from the perspective of one of those closest to Jesus, Peter. Like Jesus, Peter was a child of the Hebrew faith. He too was taught the Lord is One. But then Peter met Jesus. He traveled with him, heard him preach, and watched him heal. Then one day, Peter was the first of many to make a profound discovery. It all came together and as quickly as it came to him he spontaneously blurted out, "*You are the Christ, the son of the living God.*"

Suddenly Peter realized Jesus is both the Son of God and a human being. And then, after Jesus ascended into heaven, on the day of Pentecost, Peter made another profound discovery. The Holy Spirit came in a new presence but at the same time the same presence Peter sensed in Jesus. Somehow God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, three separate identities combined together in one marvelous way.

However, Luke doesn't write in Acts Peter publicly declared, "*The Trinity is here,*" and yet the reality of the experience was so overpowering years later Matthew concluded his gospel with Jesus' parting words, "*Make disciples of all*

nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

According to the gospels Jesus himself first used the formula FATHER, SON, and HOLY SPIRIT. Many times he spoke of God as his father one time even using the word "*abba*" for daddy implying deep intimacy and love. And in the Upper Room Jesus promised his disciples that soon after his departure the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would come to be with them.

But soon after Jesus' ascension and Pentecost, as the Church had experienced each person of the Trinity, that's when the questions and the controversies over the Trinity arose. So, the Church Fathers, bishops and theologians, counseled together many times until finally they came up with the best explanation humanly possible.

First of all the Church reaffirmed the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All three have the same nature. They share the same essence. They came to believe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same, or identical, in being. In other words, God is the Father, God is the Son, God is the Holy Spirit, all one in the same God expressing himself in three different ways.

And I say "himself" knowing that God is not a male let alone a man. God is beyond male and female. My pointing this out underscores the point our language is woefully inadequate whenever we try to explain or describe the nature of God.

Another inadequacy in our language: the Church Fathers used the formula three persons in one God. Our English word person means an individual who can think and feel and live. I'm a person. You're a person. But the Church did not mean to say that God is three individual persons (or people) mysteriously combined into one.

This is important: using our 20th century English terminology, God is one person. At the same time God's being and doing has three wonderful distinctions. So, the Church Fathers in order to define and name these distinctions came up with the Latin word "persona." The word persona comes from the Roman Theatre. Actors didn't wear costumes like they do today. Instead when an actor was on stage he wore a mask. Persona is the Latin word for mask. Sometimes one actor would play multiple roles in a particular play. So one actor might play three different roles and wear three different masks or personas.

The mask wasn't meant to hide the actor but to reveal the actor's character. So when the Church Fathers tried to say something about God's nature they were saying the One God reveals himself in three distinct ways of

being. One God coming separately yet paradoxically simultaneously as Father, Son and Holy Spirit--Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. One God who made us, who also saves us, who also keeps us in existences, unified into one Holy God.

Again, I cannot say this enough, all of these explanations are merely metaphors pointing to the unfathomable mystery of God. But, and here's the Good News, our salvation and quality of life isn't dependant on our knowing and understanding. What is important is God knows and understands us.

What's more, Jesus invites us and encourages us to enter into the mystery of the Trinity. Which now brings us to this the final and critical point.

In the Upper Room Jesus said many things. Here are a few verses lifted from John 14: *"And I will pray the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever even the Spirit of Truth. You know him, for he dwells with you and in you. In that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you."*

As I said, Jesus said a lot more, but focus on these two verses. Jesus is saying that the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit invite all of us to share in their intimacy with one another. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son. And through Jesus we are invited and encouraged to enter into this free-flowing, loving and intimate relationship of the Trinity, underscoring the fact that our Christian faith is not simply based on a list of rules and regulations, do's and don'ts, but is indeed based on your relationships with God, each other, and yourself. God creates these relationships and then invites us to enter into them so that we can be loved and then love God and one another.

And it's this invitation that makes the Doctrine of the Trinity, not a complicated theory invented by dead North African and Near Eastern males, but a living life-giving reality that is the foundation of our Christian faith and practice. So next time you hear or sing the formula Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Gloria Patri, or the Doxology, during a Creed or a baptism, always remember this: God invites you through the Trinity to be friends in relationship with Him now and forever. Amen.