

Christ Church, Georgetown
Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017
The Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

I have a picture on my wall at home. It shows half a dozen soldiers resting on the concrete step of a large and stark concrete blast wall at Basra Palace, Iraq, in 2007. They are all wearing sand colored uniforms and body armor with helmets. Weapons and radios lie by their sides. The blast wall is pockmarked with the impact of pieces of shrapnel. They all look tired and worn by the long hours of watching every step they take for fear of what might lie under the ground on which they walk. Some are sitting. One is lying down. One is looking at his phone. All are laughing uproariously about something. They depict everything I remember about what is good about the Army. Young men and women working 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in the most challenging of circumstances, united in a common purpose, facing the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune together, and closer to each other in that moment, in some ways, than they will probably be with anyone else in this life.

They were part of an organization of about 3000 soldiers called 19 Light Brigade to which I was the Force Senior Chaplain along with a team of 11 other priests and ministers of different denominations. The name had been 19 Mechanized Brigade, but it had been changed as we rerolled and prepared to go on what turned out to be a very difficult eight-month tour to Iraq.

The connotations of "Light Brigade" were not lost on the cynical British soldiers, of course, and much humor revolved around the tour which was, much to the annoyance of the Chain of Command, frequently referred to as "The Charge of the Light Brigade!"

Alfred Lord Tennyson's words may be familiar to you:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Soldiers' humor is dark. Before any dangerous operation someone, in a similar vein, was bound to quote Gimli the dwarf from *Lord of the Rings* just before some impossible fight was about to happen. (Dwarfs are portrayed as Scots in *Lord of the Rings*. I wonder why?!!) "Certainty of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for!"

Well, it may seem strange, but for me at least that dark and stark context with its tough but tender friendships is a secular version of what I very much believe lies close to the heart of the Christian life. God's purpose, shared experience of suffering, challenge and adventure and, of course, deep relationship. Any life that has these things in abundance is an abundant life. It's just such a pity that it takes war for many to ever experience it when it should be what anyone can find in churches like this one.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is often portrayed as a preacher's grave yard! It is said that you can't preach on Trinity Sunday without preaching one heresy or another! And yet it remains,

along with the Incarnation and the Resurrection, one of the key defining doctrines of Christianity. Somehow, difficult though it is, we know this is important.

John F. Kennedy once said, “When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations.”

And perhaps that’s right. The concept of the Holy Trinity—one God in three and three in one—has always been a difficult concept to grasp, and has led some religions to accuse Christianity of polytheism and blasphemy. Jesus was, after all, handed over to be crucified by his own people on that very charge, because he took to himself the authority of God. The Quran of the Muslim faith also agrees. “Certainly they disbelieve who say: ‘Surely Allah is the third (person) of the three; and there is no God but the one Allah,’ and if they desist not from what they say, a painful chastisement shall befall those among them who disbelieve.” — Qur'an, sura 5 (Al-Ma'idah), ayat 73.

But rejection of the Trinity is also much closer to home. Thomas Jefferson wrote that “Jesus did not mean to impose himself on mankind as the son of God.” Jefferson called the writers of the New Testament “ignorant, unlettered men” who produced “superstitions, fanaticisms, and fabrications.” He dismissed the concept of the Trinity as “mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus.” He famously made his own New Testament by cutting out all references to miracles and the supernatural, including the resurrection. And, as far as the Trinity is concerned at least, Christian Scientists, Christadelphians, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Unitarians, to name only some, would agree with him.

So why does the Orthodox Christian Church hold out on this understanding of God against all these for whom it is either blasphemy or fake invention and, as such, a great stumbling block? Why is today one of the seven principal feasts in the Church’s year? If it is so difficult, why is it so important?

Well, as every Sunday School child learns very early on, the answer is the one that is almost always the answer: Jesus. It is all about Jesus. All the debates and disagreements about the Trinity arose largely because of one fact. The Church believed, and believes still, that Jesus Christ was more than just the good man that Jefferson and many others today would have him be. Rather we believe that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” Jefferson and others want to believe that all the claims about Jesus’ divinity are later additions and accretions: That Jesus was a solid human teacher whom the Church later, especially the writer of Saint John’s Gospel, reinvented as God.

Now there are all sorts of reasons why this is simply not so, but one obvious one is that the very earliest writings of the New Testament show that the very earliest Christians did believe that Jesus was divine. The letter to the Philippians was written about 62 AD. That’s less than 30 years after the crucifixion, when some people who were young men and women at the time, were still in their 50s.

Philippians 2.5-11 AD 62: Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage... rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

“Being in the very nature God.” Now you can argue that they were mistaken about Jesus’ divinity, but you can’t pretend, as Jefferson claimed, that it was a later invention. The very first Christians believed it.

So the Trinity is fundamentally the doctrine that comes from what we believe about Jesus and his Incarnation and Resurrection. It is because Jesus is God’s begotten son, begotten and not made, that the Trinity is true.

So why does the Trinity matter to you and me in our daily lives anyway?

Well, I would say two things: First, JFK was right of course. Poetry is where we go when we are reaching toward something that is beyond the limitations of our human understanding. A Celtic Christian prayer puts it this way:

“Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,
Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair,
Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear,

Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share,
Three Persons in God: to one God alone we make our prayer.”

There are many such analogies that we preachers will pull out on Trinity Sunday to show that something can indeed be of the same substance and yet be encountered in three aspects or persons. Saint Augustine uses the image of three candles in a room producing one and the same light. And yet, all of them are only imperfect analogies. They give a sense of the truth, but they do not define anything.

The second thing I would say, and where I would put my faith most fully and completely is this: Saint Augustine saw to the heart of the matter when he explained the Trinity not as a definition of God so much as a description of our experience of God. As if, by definition, God could ever be defined! No, the Trinity is how we meet God and how God meets us. It is an experience and not an explanation.

Augustine begins, with what we celebrated last Sunday, the Holy Spirit.

“But I know not how any one can be a Christian believer till ... the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit, that he is a child of God; that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son: And, having this witness, he honors the Son, and the blessed Spirit, even as he honors the Father.” --Sermon 55, On the Trinity

In other words, it is our experience of the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that leads us to believe that they are, in fact, all experiences of the one true God. George Herbert put it most succinctly in his poem called “Trinity Sunday.”

Lord, who hast formed me out of mud,
And hast redeemed me through thy blood,
And sanctified me to do good;
Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me
That I may run, rise, rest with thee.

He made me, he saved me, he meets me now every day.

Without the Trinity, we must either accept the Jeffersonian Jesus, human but dead, or Jesus the lesser prophet, wise no doubt, but no one we can experience or know now, far less anyone who can breathe life into our deadness or raise us up from the ashes of this world's darkness.

Without the Trinity, all that we are left with is a distant God who cannot ultimately be known.

One who demands absolute loyalty under law or the book but enters not into the waft and brokenness, the suffering and joy of human existence. And that is just not what the earliest Christians or we today experience.

My soldiers in the picture are no image of the Trinity. (Angels with dirty faces, perhaps, but certainly far from Rublev's famous icon of the three angelic persons around a table.) But what binds these young men together in that picture of battle weary rest and laughter does point, I think, to the basic Trinitarian truth: Purpose, shared profound experience, relationship.

The Trinity is that for us. The Father's deep creative purpose for you and for me, the Son who shares our suffering and experience and in whose love and life we see God, the Holy Spirit in whom we know the presence of the living God in worship, in each other, and in our day to day lives. That is the God I know The one who meets me in these three, every day.