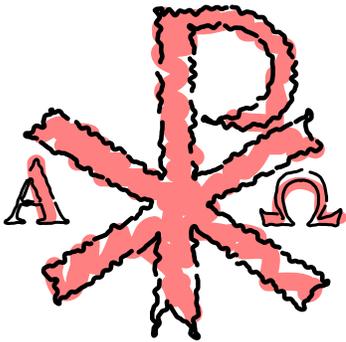


Some Thoughts on the Feast of Holy Trinity

The Feast of Holy Trinity is a unique holiday in the Christian calendar. Other feast days commemorate events from the life of Christ, some of them are festivals of Biblical characters, folks like Peter (June 29), or John (Dec 26) or even historical characters like Lawrence (August 10). But Holy Trinity really celebrates a doctrine, a doctrine which dates to a specific time and place. This necessitates the preacher approaching this day differently.

First of all, the doctrine of the Trinity belongs in the very heart of Christian faith. If you were asked for a single name to give to God, the Jew would most certainly ascribe YHWH and the Christian could as well, but he would be more accurate to say "Trinity." Jesus doesn't suffice. Jesus is not the Father or the Spirit and they are divine as well. God doesn't work either for the Moslem says the same. God is simply the generic word which people of any faith use to refer to the deity. YHWH is good, but it is the Old Testament people's name for the One who brought them out of Egypt. The Christian has another revelation of God, a revelation which has shown us even more of YHWH's nature, and that revelation is Trinity.



The articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity has a most interesting history, which really does make it unique among any doctrines. As the Christian message was proclaimed inside the Roman empire of the first centuries, it battled mightily against the synergistic nature of Hellenism, a heresy we know as Gnosticism. The Apostles Creed, which seems to have grown slowly as a baptismal creed seems to have been part of articulating how the Christian movement understood these things differently than other groups understood them.

The general approach of the Apostles Creed to the Trinity is what scholars often called "economic." It focused on what the various members of the Trinity did. The economic model for this lends itself to using the words we are most familiar with to describe what God has done: Forgiveness, Ransom, Redemption, Adoption, etc., are all terms which come from the economic model. They speak of God doing something in relationship with us. Redeem is what you can do to a friend or relative who has been sold into slavery. Forgive is what banks rarely do to loans. Adoption is giving an orphan your name and claiming him/her as your child. These are all transactions of a sort, hence the "economic" model.

Embedded within the Christian response to the Gnostic threat, however, were a number of statements about God which went unconsidered for some time. Finally, as the third and fourth centuries dawned, the Church was forced into dealing with these statements. That happened because the church was becoming increasingly sophisticated and needed to speak about God in a

way which satisfied the educated elite who were flocking into the Church. But it is also true that theologians had been struggling with this for some time. The question really revolved around what happened on the Cross. In asking this question set, the church moved from an economic model of describing the Trinity into an ontological model. The questions no longer were focused upon what God did, but just who is God. The Greek word “ontos” is the word for “being.” The Christians accepted that Jesus died for the sins of the world, but they were wondering just who died there that day? Was it God? If it was God, to whom did Jesus pray and commend his spirit? If it wasn't God who died on the cross, what does that say about the implications of the cross event for the forgiveness of sins today? Can the death of anyone other than God really effect forgiveness on a cosmic scale? Over all this hung the Old Testament dictum (Deut 6) that in fact there is only one God. The Jewish scriptures are unequivocal in that assertion and Paul followed that. There is only one God.

Two philosophically satisfying answers arose in response to these questions. In the west a fellow by the name of Sabellius lent his name to a movement called Sabellianism. He suggested that there was only one God, but he wore different masks at different times, sometimes appearing as Father, and other times as Son and still other times as Spirit. Almost no one believed this; although many in the East thought that the western Christians did believe this and it still is a suspicion harbored by those of the Orthodox tradition. In the East, in response to Sabellianism, Arius proposed that there was only one God, and that Jesus was not really God. He was the first and the mightiest of God's creations, the Logos, but he was not in the final analysis God but clearly inferior to God. He shared many attributes of God but as Arius said, “There was a time when he was not.” It became something of his slogan and you will just have to trust me that it sounds better in Greek.

While both of these answers to the question of who is Jesus are logical and make some sense, they have problems as well, some biblical problems but also another problem of what is promised in the cross to the sinner. Neither of these answers really satisfied folks and in the City of Alexandria the assistant to the Bishop, a deacon by the name of Athanasius, began to champion another way of thinking, the way which you know as Trinity. This is Athanasius on the left in the picture and Basil the Great, his theological heir on the right. According to Athanasius God is singular. There is only one God, but God also has three co-eternal, omnipotent, and co-equal essences which we name Father, Son, and Spirit.

Most of the time, we cannot tell the difference between them. Who sends the rain? All we can say is that the Unity which we most often label simply “God” did that. There is no way to determine if that was an act of Father, Son, or Spirit. The only time the three are distinguishable is in the economy of salvation. The Father sends the Son to redeem the world, the Son obeys and goes to the cross and tomb. The Father raises the Son from the dead. The Spirit is poured out on Pentecost. The



Father does not die, the Spirit is not raised. The Son is not poured out, nor is the Father. Outside those saving acts of the Christ event, we cannot tell the difference between the members of the Trinity. Even the creation, which our catechism deals with under the first article, is an act of God, not just Father as the Logos and the Spirit are both present and active in the creation.

The implications of Athanasius' theology are significant. It allows Jesus to pray to someone other than himself, but it also preserves the deity on the cross, really dying for the sins of the world. And the forgiveness of sins is what is really at stake in the doctrine of the Trinity. If you go with Sabellianism (sometimes called modalism) or with Arianism, you end up with a forgiveness problem, or more accurately stated, you end up without forgiveness, at least without the confidence of forgiveness.

To modern Christians this sounds rather odd. We have been raised in a Trinitarian world view and cannot imagine anything else. How many of our churches are not named "Trinity Lutheran" or some variant of that. I was baptized in one of those "Trinity Lutheran" Churches in rural Iowa, just outside of Ft. Dodge. What is hard for us who are so familiar with the term and take the theology for granted is that for the Christians of the third and fourth centuries, this was a serious matter. We know that there were riots in the streets of some cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire over this issue. Worship services were disrupted if someone used a formula to address God which was not deemed sufficiently correct by the gathered members of the congregation. Can you imagine ending your collect of the day and having people rush to the altar, ready to push you out the door of the Church because you used a formulaic ending of the prayer which they did not like?

Making this entire process even less savory for some of us, the motive for the council was not simply to answer a theological question. The emperor summoned the bishops to serve a need of the Roman Empire as well. As the fourth century dawned, the Empire was facing an external crisis which threatened to overwhelm it. Waves of barbarians, including most of my ancestors, were pouring out of the steppes of Asia and pillaging across Europe. The newly established emperor Constantine decided that he needed to do something to unite his fractious Empire. When he had been a sub-emperor in what is today France and England, he had summoned the local bishops to settle a dispute and it had worked. While his immediate predecessor had persecuted Christians, Constantine realized he needed them. There were enough Christians that he could not ignore them. (Some estimates are that about half the empire's inhabitants were Christians but other dispute this number.) What is more, there is every reason to believe that he piously thought that he needed to find the answer to this question.

Constantine summoned the bishops from around the empire to what was essentially the "Mother of all Voters Meetings." This took place in a suburb of his new capitol which was called Nicea, hence the creed which bears that name. Athanasius and Arius were present but not allowed to speak because they were deacons and not yet bishops, but they were the intellects behind their respective bishops. It soon became apparent that Sabellianism was not really held by anyone.

Once that specter was exorcised, the Arian argument also came under suspicion. It turns out that most of the support Arius had was in the crowd who saw his theology as a rejection of Sabellianism. When they realized that there weren't any Sabellians, they started to wonder about Arius. As the meetings proceeded, the Trinitarian theology of Athanasius gradually won out. By the end, only a handful of bishops voted against it. Of course, Constantine was there with imperial soldiers and that may have had something to do with the near unanimity as well. He apparently did not really care which way things went, he just wanted an answer. His wife on the other hand, was not happy. She was firmly in the Arian camp.

The dispute eventually came to revolve around one letter, an iota, the smallest Greek letter, in one word. The Arians wanted to describe Jesus as "homoiousios" with the Father. That meant Jesus was of a similar substance to the father, but not exactly the same. Athanasius and his party argued for "homoousios" which said that Jesus was the same substance as the Father. You know who won, it right there in the Nicene Creed: "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made..."

There are a couple of things to notice here. The doctrine of Trinity is held to be an essential element of Christian faith. It is not optional for Christians. Mormons, for instance, are not considered Christian because they deny the unity which we confess in Trinity. Jehovah's Witness deny the divinity of Christ at some points, suggesting he is an archangel. Remember that Christians hold that forgiveness itself is at stake in this. If it is not God on the cross, forgiveness does not happen. If there is more than one God, forgiveness does not happen then either. Only if the creator God is also the redeeming God of Calvary do we get the forgiveness piece.



It is also worth noting that the council of Nicea was summoned by an unbaptized political leader. Constantine would not be baptized until the end of his life. He not only summoned the meetings but apparently presided over several sessions personally. Everyone knew that he would back up the decision with imperial might. In truth, the Bishops who refused to sign the creedal statement were dismissed from their office by the emperor and escorted out of the empire by troops and deposited in the realm of the Persians. Even though it had all this going on, we confess this to be an act of the Spirit.

The meetings themselves were anything but irenic. The bishops were feisty and regularly shouted at one another. There is a strong tradition that Nicholas, the bishop of Myra, got into a fist fight and had his nose broken. You might find it interesting that this Nicholas is the foundational character for the Santa Claus story. If you ever have had a bad voter's meeting, this one was worse. At least they did not break Santa Claus's nose in your meeting! There were votes taken, there were hard words spoken. We could just chalk this up to another occasion when Christians behaved badly, but here we are with a festival day dedicated to the events of this council. It is important to note that we call this meeting an occasion when the Spirit moved and the decisions reached there that day were binding on all Christians. If you cannot confess the

contents of the Nicene Creed, you are not a Christian. That could change the way we think about rancorous voters meetings and politically active synodical conventions.

To recite the Nicene Creed is to confess the work of the Holy Spirit in this world since the day of Pentecost. It is not always evident that his activity is a spiritual event. I remember being called by a congregation who were so divided that they could only muster a one vote majority for me. Since the congregational president's group did not get their way, he refused to ask for a unanimous vote and was quite open with me about the situation. He did not want me to accept the call. Yet, it was a valid call, it was a call from God through that congregation. I did turn it down, but I considered it as much as I have any other. The presence of the Spirit does not mean that everything is neat and pretty or that the participants are all perfect and pious people. In truth, the Church has always been a collection of sinners, since the day that Jesus first started gathering fishermen and tax collectors.

We could also probably comment on the role of Athanasius and Arius as deacons and presbyters within the Church. The office of deacon had many permutations within the ancient world. Origen would be a deacon as a catechist or trainer of new Christians. Lawrence was a deacon who was essentially the treasurer for the Church in Rome. If deacons want to claim that Athanasius and other heroes are diaconal, they need to exercise a little caution, so was Arius the arch-heretic!

The controversy surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity did not end at Nicea in 325. In an inexplicable oversight, the 318 bishops gathered at Nicea included a third article to the creed which simply stated that they believe in the Holy Spirit. This opened the door for all those who had fought so hard about the divinity of the Son to transfer that fight to the Divinity of the Spirit. Sixty years later another emperor, Theodosius the Great, at the urging of the Cappadocian theologians (Basil, Gregory of Nazianus, and Gregory of Nyssa) again summoned the bishops, this time to Constantinople, for another council. This time they hammered out the wording of the third article of the Nicene Creed about the person and work of the Spirit. They did not simply mimic the language of the second article but noted that the Spirit was "worshiped with the Father and the Son." You can see this reflected in the collect for the day which speaks of us "worshiping the Unity..."

How does one preach all this? A lecture on the history of the development of this doctrine will not likely serve your people. I once heard a terrible sermon on this day which asserted that we were all really Arians and God wasn't happy with us. Not sure that was such a good idea either. Here are a few ideas which might develop into sermons:

1. Baptism – we encounter the triune name of God in Baptism. Luther will go this way in his treatment of the readings in the one year series.
2. The Church as a collection of sinners through whom the Spirit works – Organized religion doesn't fare well in the public opinion polls these days. The Council of Nicea might be a poster child for what is wrong. But we come to celebrate the work of the Spirit

through a flawed community. We are a flawed community, but that doesn't mean the Spirit is gone.

3. Centrality of the Cross – The fight at Nicea (325 AD) through Chalcedon (451 AD) would be centered upon what we say about the man hanging on the cross. Was he God or not? That question has implications for just what I am doing when I forgive your sins and say, “take and eat, the body of Christ.”
4. Love – Augustine is the inspiration here and you might want to look at his treatment of Trinity in “De Trinitate.” He asserts that the Threeness of the Trinity is a revelation of God's love. The Son is revealed because that gives the Father and object of love and one who loves the Father. Love is the very essence of God. John says it, “God is love.”
5. The Church as the believers in the content of this creed– Lutheranism admits that it is not the only true church, or at least not the only place where believers are found. Anyone who confesses this creed is a Christian and therefore a brother/sister in Christ. Too often the LCMS is portrayed, with reason, as a prickly and poor partner in relationships with other Christians. Do our people believe that we are the only Christians? Do we proclaim that they are part of a mighty host? Do we need to remind them that Augustine was not a Lutheran?
6. Lex Orandi/Lex Credendi – the Law of Prayer is the Law of Faith – this is a sermon about worship. What we do in this action we call Worship is not really a matter of indifference. What the people at the council were really fighting about is how they ended their prayers and sang their hymns. Orthodoxy is “right praise.” They understood that the words we sing and pray shape the faith that believes in Jesus

Can you think of more?