

Trinity Sunday, B - June 7, 2009
St. David's

The idea was as radical and foreign a notion as imaginable. Every world religion of the day firmly believed in polytheism, the assumption that there were many, many gods; gods for every aspect of nature, every human need and every situation in someone's life. The early statements in our Hebrew Bible attest to the fact that just like everyone else, the early Jews were also polytheists. But there is something different about the polytheism expressed by those Hebrews. The God that they had come to know and trust was Yahweh, interpreted in our text as *The Lord*. The Hebrews understood Yahweh not as a god over a certain aspect of nature, but rather as their personal god. We see this expressed in the early Bible texts often. For example, Yahweh makes it clear over and over in Exodus that his people are not to serve and worship the gods of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Canaanites, the Jebusites, and the flying kites, but instead only Him, their god, Yahweh. Much of the early text in fact, is all about proving that the Hebrew God is better than the gods of all the others. That is, in fact, what today's Psalm is all about. It is a poetic description of a thunderstorm. Rain, of course, is the lifeblood for everything in the desert. One of the most important gods of all then is the rain god, known to the Canaanites as Baal. There was also a god of the sea named Yam. So a storm as described in today's psalm was understood as the battle between Baal and Yam. The Psalm describes Yahweh's voice (translated in our new psalm interpretation as *The Beloved*), being heard over the storm, suggesting that Yahweh is the one who controls the rain, not Baal. And Yahweh is over

top of the ocean waters to show that He is stronger than Yam, the god of the sea.

Psalm 29 is really a fairly immature game of my god is better than your god.

This notion, though, that there is one god for one people is a completely new idea. That theology will continue to develop as we read later parts of the Hebrew Bible. Eventually, Yahweh begins to be seen by the Hebrews in more universal terms. They start to accept that the god they worship is much bigger than they had originally imagined. This is not just their god, they say, but this is a god big enough for everyone. That is another huge leap in religious thinking and it eventually brings Jewish theologians to the point where they say that not only is this god everyone's god, but this god is the only God. This will become Judaism's great gift to the world, the whole notion of monotheism, the religious understanding that there is only one God. It would change not only religion utterly and completely, but the way people lived their daily lives.

1300 years later or so, Muslims faced a different theological issue. The most prolific religion surrounding them was Hinduism. Hindus also have multiple deities and they are well known for creating beautiful images of those many deities. These images help Hindus understand the significance of each god in their lives. The Muslim experience of God came out of the Jewish tradition and as such they had already accepted the idea of monotheism. But Muslims also experienced God differently than their Jewish ancestors. They knew of a God in their life experience that suggested a reality beyond their ability to conceive. God for them was encountered as the holy other, very different than their Hindu neighbors experiences. Muslims encountered a

transcendent being that was immaterial, intangible and totally distinct from anything earthly. Therefore, God to them could only be invisible. The mystery of the God they knew was so profound and so unlike anything worldly that It cannot and should not be portrayed in any fashion. This is Islam's great contribution to the world's understanding of divinity...the profound otherness of God.

The Christian experience of God could not have been more different. Also coming out of Judaism, monotheism would be a given for the Christian experience too. But very unlike the God encounters by Muhammad, Christians would experience a God not invisible, but here with them in the flesh. They knew God as being so close and so intimate that God was actually one of us.

Of course, this incarnational experience of God created a major issue. If there is only one God, how can God be away from us and with us? How can God be the holy other and a human being? The resulting theological discussion around these weighty issues would produce Christianity's greatest gift to the world, the doctrine that has come to be known as The Trinity.

As we all know, it did not come easy. Just as the Jewish experience of monotheism was seen by the rest of the world as the greatest heresy of all time, resulting in Jews being persecuted at unprecedented levels, Christians faced similar persecutions. Just as the Muslim experience of a single God invisible to us was mocked and laughed at by others, Christians were also treated like children in the early days of the movement. Such drastic changes in the way we understand ultimate realities are always met with skepticism and the cry of heresy. But it is also these huge

leaps in faith that have created the greatest growth in our understanding of God and all that lies beyond our senses. Such progressions of thought though, always come with great difficulty and angst. In the case of Christianity, it was not so much what other people did to us, but more the internal battles that resulted as we wrestled with a way to describe the experience of an intimate God.

It is not just the apparent conflict with the tenets of monotheism that made the concept of the Trinity so difficult for so many to accept. The other problem is that it is an idea that goes far beyond what we read in the Bible. Today's readings do not speak directly of the Trinity because there is no such concept in the Bible. In fact, the word Trinity does not exist at all in the text. The first reading from Isaiah is a classic for Trinity Sunday, only because of two cryptic references. First is the three fold Holy, Holy, Holy that we repeat every week in the Sanctus and again today in our opening song. Since there are three Holy's, the suggestion is...well, you get it. And then, Yahweh responds to Isaiah saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for US? This first person plural response suggests that God was seen as more than a single entity. In the reading from Romans, Paul does refer to God in three ways, as Abba (Daddy), and to Christ, and to the Spirit of God. Three elements, but a far cry from a developed Trinitarian theology.

The closest we get is in the Gospel, the famous one from John. We hear about God the Father and are told that the Spirit and Christ have come from the Father. That's it. Obscure at best, and that is all those early Bishops had to work with as they literally fought about a concept so completely different than anything any religion had

ever struggled with before.

This is another important lesson for us on Trinity Sunday. Here we have Christianity's greatest contribution to the world's understanding of God and it cannot be found directly in our Bible. It happened as a result of people faithfully studying their Bibles and then interpreting those texts for their present place and condition. The same can be said for the Jewish movement to monotheism and the Muslim understanding of the otherness of God. If Hebrews had stayed only with their Biblical text, they would have spent all of their time continuing to come up with reasons why their god was better than other gods. But instead, they used their experience of the world combined with the experience of God described by their ancestors in the Torah to come up with a profoundly new and beautiful concept. Muslims did the same thing, moving beyond the text of the Qur'an to a new understanding of God that continues to inform us today.

The same holds true for us. We have the great fortune of living in a time when we have had the opportunity to be exposed to all three of these wonderful contributions to the world's understanding of ultimate reality. We are so enriched by the Jewish concept of monotheism, the Muslim experience of the holy other, and our own trinitarian understanding of God. But if we stop there, then we have not learned much from our ancestors. Instead we, like them, need to take our own experiences of the world and view them through the lens of these ancient theologies. By doing so, we too will have the opportunity to expand the world's vision of God into something even more powerful than what we have now.

As we talked about a few weeks ago, the world is in the midst of a major shift in worldview. We are moving from the modern worldview into one we are presently calling post-modern. The post-modern era demands that we view concepts like the trinity through a new lens. If we do not, we run the risk of becoming irrelevant and spouting a theology that has no meaning in the world in which we live.

I spoke a few weeks ago of the teenager in Atlanta who could not understand what the adults were fighting about as they discussed the virgin birth. “Of course it is true”, he said. “It is too beautiful not to be true.” It is through those same eyes that Bartholomew I, the present Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox church, recently talked about God in his book, *Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*. He describes “God as unknowable and yet as profoundly known, as invisible and yet as personally accessible; as distant and yet as intensely present. The infinite God thus becomes truly intimate,” he suggests, “in relating to the world.”

In the post-modern world, where we have come to realize that there is not one truth but multiple truths, not one way to see reality but many, we begin to realize that those early Hebrews had it right. It also becomes clear that the early Muslims had it right, and the Christians who had the courage to develop the concept of the trinity had it right. God is both invisible and intimately with us. There is only one God and that God cannot exist but by being in relationship with itself. God is at the same time one God and a community of persons.

During the modern era, the whole concept of the Trinity started to be questioned. The images of the Holy Spirit proceeding from Father or from the Father and Son

conjured up the vision of a patriarchal, hierarchical God. People used the Trinity as justification to build churches that only men could lead and also to create a corporate ladder power structure that moved us miles away from the servant leadership as taught to us by Jesus.

But seen through the eyes of post-modernism, The Trinity means something very different. It offers us an image of God in relationship not only with the world and us, but also with God. It suggests that the very essence of God is not a single ruler watching over the world, but instead a being that is in relationship with itself. A post-modern understanding of the Trinity helps us to grasp a theology that tells us that God is also not hierarchical, but equal. The Spirit is not more or less important than the Son, and the Son is not more or less important than the Creator. Every aspect of God is just as important as every other aspect. In a similar way, post-modernism helps us to realize that God cannot be a gender because God is beyond gender, beyond any human description, just as the Muslims told us.

All this is important because in our tradition, we understand ourselves as being made in the image of God. The Trinity is our example of how we are to relate to each other and the world. If the Trinity is all about equal relationship among the persons of God, then we are also all about relationship with each other. Perhaps the human concept that comes closest to capturing what we mean in a post-modern sense when we use the term Trinity is the African word, *ubuntu*. Our own Bishop Desmond Tutu defines *ubuntu* as meaning “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound, in yours...a person is a person through other persons.” A person with *ubuntu*, the Bishop

tells us, “is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole.” It is this idea that made the Truth and Reconciliation Commission actually work in putting an end to the never ending pattern of violence in South Africa. The person injured had the opportunity to look in the eyes of their oppressor and say, “What you did to me was a crime because I am a human and not an animal. You are responsible for it because you are a human and not an animal. My humanity is tied up in yours. My humanity is affirmed by my choice today to treat you as a human, who even now can make the choice to not behave hurtfully. Wounding you and punishing you will not heal me. I forgive you.”

This is the incredible power of understanding God as part of the community called the Trinity. God’s very essence is that God is a community within Godself. And as images of this God, we too are first and foremost, fundamentally connected to one another.

Just as the existence of God makes no sense in a vacuum, our lives are meaningless unless we are in relationship with each other. That is why we call this act we do here “communion.” Together, we share in the mystery, together we discover the essence of God.

Today then, on this only feast day when we celebrate a theological concept rather than an event, I pray that we can honor not just the great truth of Christianity, the Trinity, but also the gift of monotheism given to us by our Jewish ancestors and the concept of the holy other contributed by Islam. By embracing all of these advances in

our understanding of God and rejecting the modern notion that only one can be right, we will more fully develop our vision of God. And as that vision expands, we cannot help but grow closer to God.

Finally, let us not make idols out of these great concepts that have given us so much, but let us be willing to expand them and go beyond them as we experience God in a new and swiftly changing world. Amen.