

## Sermon for Trinity Sunday

May 22, 2005

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

One of the great hymns of the Episcopal Church came to us from the Church of Ireland in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was translated and set to music by a very talented woman named Cecil Francis Alexander, however its genesis lay in words by St. Patrick and its tune is a traditional Irish melody. Its title is *St. Patrick's Breastplate*, and you will hear an arrangement by Mr. Lowden sung at the Offertory. It was sung by a priests' choir at my ordination at Trinity Cathedral and has stayed in my mind ever since. Its opening verse reads, **"I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three."** All of which brings us to what this day is about, The Trinity, the celebration of a doctrine rather than an historical event; the summation of our faith rather than the events upon which that faith is founded.

We as Christians believe in a particular God and my thought this morning is that the particular God that we believe in, or to be more precise, the particular **doctrine** of God which most Christians hold officially, is the most nearly adequate answer we have to know who and what God is. It's one thing to believe there is a God; it is something else to say what God is or is like. And yet this is what we are compelled to do if we are to find answers to the questions that come up in our lives. All religion starts with these questions. Christian doctrine is the body of answers we have inherited from our forbearers in the faith. We can accept the answers or reject them, but we have no choice about the questions. They force themselves upon us in every generation, and compel us to find new answers if we are going to reject the old ones. I suggest to you that the old ones are still the best ones. The first and most common question is where did it all come from.

The answer which is emotionally most satisfying and, scientifically not impossible even in these high tech times, is that all this is the work of an intelligent being, ineffably greater than any other being we can imagine, that our universe and all that is in it, is indeed a Creation by a Creator, that there is a Divine Source for all we see and know, a source whom we have not seen, yet can know in what he has given to us. From our knowledge of this world and its wonders we infer the fact of the God who made it all, and, despite a frequent dismissal of this, we call him Father, because human *fatherhood*,

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at its very best, is the closest parallel we have to what the act of Creation must be. The God who accounts for all that is, is God the Father.

The second question is *Who was Jesus Christ?* This question arises from the fact that at a known time in a known place there lived one Jesus of Nazareth who both said and did things which have never been forgotten, which were so remarkable that they demand some explanation in terms of his identity. Even if we don't know what he said and did, or all of it, we do know of his existence and his influence upon the course of history. So, the question remains, "*Who was this?*" and it has occupied the thought of the world for 2000+ years and received many answers. But the one answer which comes closest to fitting all the facts known about him, is that he was a divine being who was at the same time completely human, that in some sense he was God. He was God's son who uniquely shared the life and will and work of the Heavenly Father, and so showed forth his nature in the world we inhabit. This is what is called *hard doctrine*.....it asks us to accept something which is almost beyond our capacity to believe. That strange man Jesus is, in fact, part of the memory of the human race. If he is not God, then who is he? Is it really more difficult to believe that he is the Son of God than to believe that he is something else, or something less?

The third question is, *How will we explain the continuing influence of God made known in Jesus Christ through all these 2000+ years?* For that influence has persisted. It has been felt in individual lives which have been seized by a power beyond themselves, and changed and redirected and upheld in the greatest of difficulties. It has been felt in social institutions in spite of their natural conservatism which would hold them fast in old ways, so that knowledge has been increased among us, customs have been softened, justice has been more evenly dispensed and life in general has been made better and brought closer to the standards set by Christ himself. Above all, this has been seen in the life of the fellowship we call the Church. To be sure, there have been times when the influence of Jesus Christ has met with blind and stupid opposition and frustration, but it has never entirely died out. It has always been renewed, sometimes after many generations on a large scale, and somewhere in every generation on a small scale. How

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do we explain it? One answer is that this influence is the work of God's Holy Spirit, that there is a divine power at work in the world constantly which brings God as close as our inmost hopes and thoughts, where he continues to do the work of Creation and Redemption which are the signs of God's unceasing love.

This, too, is *hard doctrine*, but what is hard about it is not what it says about God, but the facts which it attempts to explain about ourselves. If our best instincts and actions and thoughts do not come from God, then from where do they come? If that Spirit which operates within us to give us hope when there is no hope, and strength when there is no strength left in us, and wisdom when our minds are blank and empty, if this is not God's Spirit, the whose spirit is it? We can't dodge the question just by refusing the answer the Christian faith offers to us.

So, perhaps you can see that when the Church, our Christian religion, insists that the Divine reality which we call God is most adequately understood as a Holy Trinity, it is not just confronting us with a mystery which is beyond our comprehension, but rather it is offering us an answer to questions which arise out of our own experience. The Father-Creator is God; the Son-Redeemer is God; the Spirit-Sanctifier and Guide is God. Yet God is One in all his works and ways, and all of these bear witness to his love.

Now, knowing this, is it going to be any easier getting the kids off to school tomorrow morning? Is it going to help us deal with a bitter winter or a scorching summer or high gasoline prices or out-of-sight shore rentals? Will it help a teacher figure out how to help get a borderline student through finals? Will it help a lawyer win a case; a doctor heal a patient? The answer to all of the above is *possibly*, but not *probably*. This doctrine is not so much a way of stating what others have known about God as it is a promise of the ways in which *we* can know him and approach him if we want to. If we will *bind unto ourselves the Name, the strong Name of the Trinity*, if we will claim this promise we can make our very own all the fullness and blessings of our religion.

AMEN.