

A sermon preached on Trinity Sunday, June 12, 2022 at  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31. Canticle 13. Romans 5:1-5. John 16:12-15

How often did you think about the Trinity this past week? The Trinity has been a rich element of the daily prayer experience, the public worship and music of Christian people, as well as the Christian understanding of God down through the centuries.

It may surprise you to know that the word "Trinity" is not mentioned in the Bible. However, the three members of the Trinity are all frequently mentioned in the New Testament. Jesus commanded us to baptize people in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In today's Epistle and Gospel readings all the members of the Trinity are mentioned in each reading, which happens frequently. Paul is very clear, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all." So the oneness and three-ness of God are clear biblical realities. And the biblical authors were not focused on explaining the Trinity. Their focus was helping people experience a life-giving relationship with the fullness of the one God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Gospels tell us how the first disciples came to experience the one God as three persons. Those first disciples of Jesus were good Jews who knew, loved and worshipped the one God who created all things, the God who led the people of Israel out of Egypt, the God who gave the 10 commandments, the God whose Spirit spoke through the prophets, the God they prayed with in their daily prayers.

Then, in a surprising way, they experienced Jesus entering their lives and personally calling them to follow him. As they spent time with Jesus, they began to recognize that Jesus was not just a teacher or a prophet or a miracle worker. This Jesus was God's Son, God's Messiah. To see and experience Jesus was to see and experience what God is like. Jesus told them, "The Father and I are one. If you have seen me, you have seen my Father." "I only say and do what my Father tells me." To see the crucified and then the risen Jesus validated for them that Jesus was God's Son, as he said.

And as Jesus was about to leave planet earth and ascend into heaven, to the one he called his Heavenly Father, Jesus said, in today's gospel, I will send my Holy Spirit "to guide you into all truth." On Pentecost... and for the rest of their lives, those first disciples experienced the power of God's Spirit coming upon them, working through them, healing others through them, guiding them, giving them wisdom, just as Jesus had done when he was with them.

So those first disciples experienced a relationship of loving communion with the one God through three kinds of expressions of the fullness of God. And followers of Jesus down through the centuries have been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and have experienced a relationship with the One God who lives in and through our lives moment by moment as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our worship is filled with references to one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Since we have all been baptized in the name of the Trinity, the question we need to ask ourselves is, how can we keep deepening our relationship with this Holy Trinity?

One way we deepen our relationship with the Trinity is to pray to each person of the Trinity in our daily prayers. Take a moment to think...Do you tend to pray to the Father, or to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit? Or do you usually pray to God? Different people, at different times in their lives find it easier or more natural to focus their prayers on one particular member of the Trinity. Throughout the Bible, prayers addressed sometimes to the Father, sometimes to Jesus and sometimes to the Holy Spirit. So there is not just one way to address God. We can develop an intimacy with each member of the Trinity and we can talk to the whole Trinity which we refer to as God. So this week...and throughout our worship today... I invite you to experiment with praying to each person of the Holy Trinity so you can get to know them better.

Another way Christians have deepened their experiential relationship with this Trinitarian God is by praying with the famous Russian icon of the Trinity here in front of the pulpit. Donna Brown has taken a picture of a smaller icon of the Trinity which is in our side chapel and hopefully you received a copy of it as you entered the church today. It is for you to take home and pray with.

How many of you have ever worshipped in an Eastern Orthodox Church, like the Greek Orthodox or Russian Orthodox Church? When you enter an Orthodox Church, you will immediately notice that the church is filled with icons. Icons are symbolic representations of Biblical stories and persons as well as Christian Saints through the ages. The word icon is used in the Bible 23 times. In Colossians 1:15 Paul says, "Christ is the image or icon of the invisible God." The Greek word for image is icon. Orthodox Christians do not worship the icons as if they were idols. They very intentionally use flat figures, so they can symbolically point to the Biblical story or person or saint through which the Holy Spirit flowed. While there are significant differences, icons are to Eastern Orthodox Christians a bit like what stained glass windows have been to Western Christians, non-verbal windows inviting us into God's presence and work through the centuries.

This icon is sometimes called the Old Testament Trinity because it invites us into the story of Genesis 18 which says, "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent...Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him. Notice the Lord, (singular), appeared as 3 men. Abraham ran to them (plural) and said, my Lord, (singular) if I have found favor with you, do not pass by your servant, let me provide" food and hospitality to you. After the meal, the conversation continued, sometimes "they" spoke to Abraham, sometimes the Lord "singular" spoke telling Abraham that "when I return, in due season, your wife Sarah will have a son."

This story from the Bible was used in the icon to reflect the mysterious paradox of one God present in three persons, talking with Abraham. As you look at the icon in your hands, the figure on the left symbolically represents God the Father. Notice the building above his head..."in my Father's House are many mansions". The figure in the center is Jesus, celebrating the Eucharist at the altar, with the lamb of God, the living sacrifice of Christ's death in the

center of the altar. The tree above Jesus symbolizes the oak of Mamre from the Genesis story, plus the Tree of Life from both the Garden of Eden and the New Heaven described in Revelation, and also the cross on which Christ was crucified was made from a tree which was cut down and became the tree of eternal life for all who trust Christ. The Holy Spirit is the figure on the right, looking and leaning into Jesus, who looks and leans toward the Father who leans back toward the others. Do you see the circle, the community of love that flows within and around the Trinity?

In the front of the altar notice the little rectangle opening to which the hand of the Holy Spirit is pointing, inviting the person looking at the icon to move in through the opening and up into being in the presence of this Trinitarian community of sacrificial love. As Paul says in today's epistle, we are invited through faith, into this peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are drawn into sharing in the glory of God through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

This icon was painted or written by Andrew Rublev in 1425 during a violent time of political unrest in Russia. By being with, experiencing God the Holy Trinity as they prayed before this icon, Russians were able to find a life-giving, hope-filled place to be grounded... when the world around them was being shaken and destroyed by violence. They experienced the Holy Trinity flowing through this icon and into their lives, drawing them into loving communion and oneness with the Holy Trinity.

This week, I invite you to take this icon home and find a quiet time and place to spend a few minutes just gazing on this icon, sensing the loving community of God the Holy Trinity inviting you to be inside the circle with them. You may do this once this week or every day or even every morning and evening. Just being there with the Trinity in their loving Communion may help you experience the peace of God, even in the midst of the struggles in your personal life and in the world around us. The more you prayerfully gaze on the Holy Trinity you may find yourself sensing that throughout the day, you are always living in the encircling presence of the Holy Trinity, no matter where you are or what you are doing.

Of course, icons are not helpful to everyone, and praying with them is not a requirement. And many people down through the centuries and today have found, as I have found, that prayerfully gazing on this icon has helped them experience a deeper love relationship with God the Holy Trinity.

This morning, I've invited you to take on two experiments of praying with the Holy Trinity this coming week. First, to experiment with addressing your prayers separately to each person in the Trinity to develop your individual relationship with each of person...and also praying to the one God who includes all three persons.

Second, I've invited you to experiment with praying with the Trinity by gazing on and entering into the relationship of love expressed in the icon of the Trinity.

Let's close our eyes now and take a few moments of silence to talk with God about when and where you might practice these two prayer experiments with the Trinity this week....

As our closing prayer, I invite you to pray together a song of adoration for the Trinity which we practiced before the service. The words of this song are: Father we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you. Jesus, we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you. Spirit we adore you, lay our lives before you. How we love you.

First we will sing and pray these three verses together in unison. (If you are not a singer, just silently pray the words from the depths of your heart.). Then after the "Spirit we adore you" verse, we will break into a round. The lectern side of the church will begin singing the first line, "Father we adore you"...then I will lead the pulpit side of the church into singing the song in a round...and we will sing the round together two times through the Trinity. As we prayerfully sing this round, I hope you will experience a sense of being woven into loving, flowing communion with each other and with God the Holy Trinity. Let us prayerfully sing together....