Homily for Trinity Sunday

May 30th, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

X In the Name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

I have never understood why so many preachers fear this Sunday.

There are many jokes about priests doing almost anything

to get out of preaching on Trinity Sunday.

I suppose I could have done the same –

I could easily use this walker and my still-mending leg as an excuse.

But, in truth, I love talking about the Trinity.

I won’t try to explain the Trinity by using analogies,

because when you do, you will always commit heresy at some point.

I remember once, about two years ago, in my former parish,

listening to my Rector preach on Trinity Sunday,

and he noticed this giant grin I had on my face,

and that I was quietly chuckling to myself.

Afterwards, in the sacristy, he asked me what had struck my funny bone.

I said, “Sir, you’re about to be made a bishop,

and yet you managed to preach modalist heresy no fewer than three times

in that eight-minute sermon.”

I suppose he wasn’t amused by my comment.

But he fell into the trap so many do, thinking that today’s sermon

needs to somehow explain the Trinity by using images or concepts

derived from observations familiar to us from everyday experience.

That is something that simply cannot be done,

and it’s the same approach to searching for understanding

that we see Nicodemus exhibit in today’s Gospel reading.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says,

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God;

for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.”

Now Nicodemus is a learned and honorable man,

held in esteem as a religious authority and a leader in the community,

and he likewise holds Jesus in very high regard.

His statement to Jesus is typical of a scholar.

In other words, based on what I’ve seen with my own eyes,

it is clear that you are a Holy Man, and that God is active in you.

Nicodemus is certainly right on that count,

but his perception and assessment of Jesus is only partial – it’s incomplete.

When Jesus responds to Nicodemus, he cuts to the heart of the matter,

saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

In other words, Nicodemus, you cannot see what’s really happening here

with empirical data,

but only with the eyes of faith.

We have to laugh here at Nicodemus’s earnestness,

as he takes Jesus literally and says “How can anyone be born again

after having grown old?” No one can be born out of the womb a 2nd time.

In what follows, Jesus talks about the Spirit,

and how the Spirit moves in and through the lives of believers.

But Nicodemus doesn’t get it yet, and he will not get it for some time.

It is only after the Crucifixion,

when he brings myrrh and aloes for Jesus’s burial in the tomb,

that he begins to understand.

Divine Revelation is, after all, based on experience,

experiences that sometimes aren’t quantifiable.

The only thing that is quantifiable is the effect that the life of faith

has within us –

how it changes us, and how we show forth the fruits of our faith

in our own lives, and in our behavior towards the world around us.

Now, what I am saying this morning is not an attack on intellectualism

nor the scholastic or academic method: far from it.

Intellectual pursuit is essential to Christianity.

What I am saying however,

is that trying to defend or explain the doctrine of the Trinity

would simply be a waste of our time this morning,

However, we can at least talk about what the Trinity means for our lives,

both corporately as Church, and personally, as children of God.

To do so, we begin with the clearest revelation of God:

Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity.

Jesus is revealed to us as God Incarnate – the Son of God.

We, the Church, are his Body –

we share in his life and death through our baptism,

in which we are born anew through water and the Spirit.

And so, when we look to find our own place and our own identity,

we must first look to Jesus and consider his identity within the Trinity.

Jesus has an intimate relationship with the Father,

and St. John goes to great lengths to stress the oneness

of Jesus and his Father,

particularly in the discourse of the Last Supper.

There is a closeness in the relationship of Father and Son,

one of begetting and of being begotten – yes –

but a joy and a love and a peace that flows from one to the other.

It is as if when the Father exhales the Son inhales,

and likewise, the Son breathes out and the Father breathes in:

and that is the procession of the Spirit – that breath of life.

It is that same Holy Spirit, whose descent upon the church

we celebrated last week,

that enables us as Church to live the life of the Trinity.

As Christians, as the Church,

the Trinity is not some obscure doctrine,

or an impossible mystery that constantly needs to be defined or explained:

it is simply the shape and the nature of our life,

based on our experience of who Jesus is, and our identity as his Body.

Consider, for example, our worship: it is Trinitarian in nature, is it not?

We offer our love and praise to God the Father through his Son,

of which we are a part – being his Body – in the Holy Spirit.

Now the Spirit may find part of its identity

in being the connection between the Father and the Son,

but it is not lesser than those two,

for the Spirit is a part of the Unity of that same Godhead:

the Spirit is that which gives us life and enables the work of the Church,

her priests, and her sacraments – it fills our worship and praise.

I sometimes wonder if we too often use “Jesus”-centered language

to describe the feeling of God at work in our lives or in our worship,

when it might more accurately be ascribed to the Spirit.

But it doesn’t really matter,

because that Spirit is inseparable from Jesus the Son,

who is inseparable from God the Father.

When we encounter one, in truth we encounter all three.

The divine revelation to the church of God as Three in One

is a great gift.

It enables us to understand our own lives within the life of God.

It shows us a God who in all things

can be understood as valuing relationship and communion.

To be caught up in the life of God – the life of the Trinity –

is to experience and feel the love of a God who wants to be known,

and who wants to know you – to be in relationship with you.

To be a Christian is to understand

from Scripture the love that the Father has for the Son,

and the love the Son has for the Father,

and to see from the actions of Jesus’s own life and death

how that same love is actually directed

not just inwardly between the Father and the Son,

but outwardly for the whole world.

The Father loves the Son because the Son loves the world;

the Son loves the Father because the Father loves the world.

In and out, back and forth, in circles,

as the Spirit proceeds between them both –

breathing in and breathing out.

It’s a dizzying prospect – a wonderful image of dancing and swirling light,

the light of Divine Love.

And so, on this Trinity Sunday, I invite you to come and join that dance,

to get caught up in the life of the Trinity, which is the life of God:

to experience his love for you and for the world.

As we heard in our Gospel reading this morning,

in a context we do not usually hear this verse used:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Come – enjoy that life in the Spirit, which blows where it will –

who knows how?

Come – experience the mystery.

Experience the love of God:

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

X May the holy and blessed Trinity guard and keep us, now and for ever.

Amen.