

TEXT: Matthew 28:16-20
THEME: I am with you always
SUBJECT: Trinity
TITLE: Divinization

Trinity Sunday
07 June 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Of all the Sundays in the Church Year, Trinity Sunday has witnessed, by far, the most silly gibberish babbled from the pulpit. One man only attended worship on Trinity Sunday. Not Christmas. Not Easter. On no other occasion did he darken a church door. When asked “Why?” he gleefully responded, “I just love to see the preacher get so confused.”

I confess my confusion and fair share of gibberish uttered on Trinity Sunday. God, especially a trinitarian understanding of God, is not amenable to explanation. This does not make the Trinity special or unique. Many things defy explanation: why there is something rather than nothing, innocent suffering, the crooked forest in Poland, ball lightning, Patomskiy Crater, light beer and, of course, the designated hitter rule.

Reality has proved more resistant to comprehension by reason alone than the Enlightenment believed. Just because something eludes the grasp of explanation does not render it a figment of the imagination. From Job to *The Brothers Karamazov*, explanations of innocent suffering—something very, very real—have failed to put Humpty Dumpty together again. The suffering of a child, the incomprehensible vastness and beauty of the universe, the miracle of life itself, each very real, each confounding our explanatory powers.

Ignatius of Loyola had a vision of the Trinity as three musical notes comprising one chord. St Patrick famously saw the three leaf clover as an image of the Trinity. Frank Shed, preaching in the rain in Hyde Park, London, declared water, existing in three forms - steam, ice, and liquid - an image of the Trinity. One Moravian pastor, in a children’s message, used three ply TP as an image of the Trinity. Classy! Better the Bavarian priest who declared to the gathered faithful on Trinity Sunday that he understood nothing of it, therefore there would be no sermon.

In what follows I am following David Bentley Hart, an Eastern Orthodox scholar of religion, a philosopher, writer, and cultural commentator. Christianity entered human history, not as a new creed or wisdom path or system of religious observances, but as the sudden unveiling of a mystery hidden in God. A slave legally crucified at the behest of all the religious and political authorities of his time was raised up by God as the one sole Lord over all the cosmos.

This apocalypse (sudden unveiling) announced a new age of creation, an urgent call to all persons to come out from the shelters of social, cultic, and political association into a condition of perilous and unprotected exposure. John Oxenham’s hymn says the same thing poetically: “In Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world.”

St Paul's apocalypse on the road to Damascus opened his mind to understand that divisions created by race, ethnicity, social or economic status, and gender, are transcended in Christ: we are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Christianity is the unveiling of the reality that we are already one, one in God, one in our humanity.

Trinitarian language evolved out of this single simple intuition: if it is the Son who joins us to the Father, and only God can join us to God, then the Son is God in a wholly consubstantial sense (of one and the same substance or being); and if, in the sacraments of the church and the life of sanctification, it is the Spirit who joins us to the Son, and only God can join us to God, then the Spirit too must be God in this wholly consubstantial sense.

The early church believed God in his fullness really has come to dwell in our midst in Christ. And in the Holy Spirit, God in his fullness has really brought us to dwell in Christ. All that makes us human is already present in God and, conversely, all that makes us divine in Christ is already implicit in our nature's inmost essence. In all of us, and in all things, sleeps a divine nature. Awakening to this reality is the beginning of the spiritual life.

I know we are wading into deep water, but we need to learn to swim before we drown in despair. What happens when we fail to awaken to this reality? Read the paper. Watch BBC or PBS news. The testimony of history tells us that when we lose faith in this transcendent vision of who we are, the will to power grows. When we no longer believe dominion and power belong to God, dominion and power become the gods we serve.

The vacuum created in our souls when we give up on transcendent truth is filled by nihilism. As the New Yorker cartoon has it, "Friday the 13th, an insignificant day in a series of increasingly insignificant days." When life becomes meaningless, cruelty and insatiable greed are easily justified in the pursuit of dominion and power, the ultimate arbiters of reality. What becomes hidden is not God, but the commodity of cheap labor, the economic burden of the unemployed, the irrelevance of those who lack the power of purchase.

Lest you think the doctrine of the Trinity is but a philosophical abstraction, or a hangover from Augusta's need to unify the empire in 4th century Rome - both conclusions have a grain of truth but not grains sufficient to make a decent loaf of bread or distill a whiskey worth sipping - let me suggest that the Trinity preserves our humanity. At this moment preservation is not nothing! But the Trinity does more than preserve our humanity, it reveals the glory of our humanity.

Christianity cannot be reduced to a creed, however helpful creeds may be as aids to understanding. Christianity cannot be reduced to a way of life, however wise its precepts may be as guides for living well. Christianity cannot be reduced to the rites and rituals of religion, however useful these may be for ordering our days and giving meaning to our lives. Christianity entered history as the unveiling of a mystery hidden in God: God became human in order that we might become like God.

Nothing can become anything but what in some sense it already is, otherwise its transformation would actually be only its annihilation and replacement by something else. Because we are created in the image and likeness of God, deification is the “natural” end of all we are. The God who creates us out of infinite love also crowns us with divine glory.

We are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This baptism names our essential nature: the image and likeness of God. This baptism declares our true identity: daughters and sons of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus. This baptism reveals our destiny: union with God and with one another through the power of the Holy Spirit.

PRAYER: by Origen of Alexandria (182-251), one of the greatest Orthodox Christian theologians. The prayer is a reflection on Ephesians 4:6, “One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.” The “translation” is by Scott Cairns.

As with any giddy-making Mystery
you might hope to grip, in part
to apprehend, you’ll have to settle
for a relatively local image to suggest
the God’s surpassing all-sufficiency.
The sun, say, by its obvious position,
is patently *above all* things that crowd
our blue-green globe, and by its rays
it can be said to shine *through all*.
And more: when the power of its light
has pierced through every depth,
It is said thereby to be *in all*. In just
this way, we might surmise—in keeping
with our spinning apprehensions—
that its supremacy is underscored
by the words *above all*, and its sufficiency
for every being in the *through all*,
and still the coming of the power
of God made manifest in the *in all*.
The result, then, is
that no one is found, ever,
to be empty, due to our God’s
truly being, and of His being *all in all*.