

Homily, May 30, 2010
The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity
Prv 8:22-31; Ps 8:4-9; Rom 5:1-5; Jn 16:12-15



A friend of mine graduated this month with an M.A. in Theology. During finals week he stopped by my office to tell me he had just finished his oral comprehensive exam. He thought it went pretty well.

We are are, or were, in the program together ... although he was about two years ahead of me. So, of course, I asked him what the exam was like, since I will have to take it too. "It wasn't bad," he said. "The tone was friendly and informal." The only question that made him pause was this one:

"Given that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a common heritage through Abraham and that all three are monotheistic, what is it that sets Christianity apart from the other two?"

I just grinned when he told me that, because it's the "Trinity" question.

Christians believe in one God, as do Jews and Muslims; however we believe that although God is one, God is not solitary. We believe in one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As Catholics we constantly acknowledge the Trinity. We are baptized in the name of the Trinity, we invoke the Trinity whenever we make the Sign of the Cross, and we profess our belief in the Trinity every time we recite the Creed.

But is the notion of the Trinity so ubiquitous that we no longer think about it? Does it matter to us that we believe in a triune God?



Last Thursday a friend of mine passed away after a long struggle with cancer. He was Jewish and a professor at Creighton. He liked to talk with me about religion. He thought religious faith was important and worried about people who didn't have any. The last time we spoke, the topic of conversions came up, so I asked him why he thought some Christians converted to Judaism.

He was quiet for a moment and then said: “The Christian notion of God is too complex – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – people have enough problems without making God so complicated.”

He had a point; one that I’m sure for some people isn’t too far from the truth.

The Trinity is a mystery. If you think you should understand it clearly, you will be frustrated. But a mystery isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Pondering over a mystery can help us to grow in faith. And of course, we don’t have to fully understand something in order for it to give us joy. Often it’s the thing we don’t understand that captures our imaginations.



One of my theology professors liked to remind us that whatever we said or believed about one aspect of theology affected every other aspect. It was like a mobile that hangs over a baby’s crib: touch one of the ornaments and all the others will move as well:

What you understand about God affects your understanding of human nature, which affects your understanding of human destiny, which affects your understanding of spirituality, ethics, and social justice.

‘There ought to be a link’, my professor liked to say, ‘between your understanding of God and the the brand of tennis shoes you buy.’



I can’t explain the Trinity to you, but let me share four ruminations that have helped me to go deeper into the practical mystery of God. The first is one of my favorites and it comes from a medieval scholar:

- It is hard to imagine a solitary, isolated individual living in love. Love is, after all, relational. Think of a group of close friends or the members of a family: among them love is given and received and shared. How could God be love from the beginning, before there was anything else, if God wasn’t a Trinity? How can something give, receive and share love with nothing?

The other three are just amalgamations of things I've read or heard:

- First, if we are created in the image of God, what does that mean if God is the Trinity? We live in an age and in a culture that celebrates a radical notion of freedom and individualism. How do we think about that in light of our understanding of God and love? Does love free us or does it bind us? What is the proper relationship between an individual and his community?
- Second, how can we envision God as both transcendent and immanent if our monotheism is unitarian and not trinitarian? In other words, how can God exist outside of space and time and yet at the same time come into our world and be a limited, contingent human being? Who is Jesus if we don't believe in the Trinity? If Jesus isn't the second person of the Trinity, then who are we and what is our hope?
- And third, does the uniquely Christian emphasis on forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation make more sense and become more urgent if we believe in the Trinity – in whose image we were made?

The Christian understanding of God as the Trinity is not just a topic for theology students. It is a mystery that should capture everyone's imagination. It should change hearts and transform lives.



Faith isn't just an intellectual pursuit of course. Faith is lived out in every aspect of our lives. So let me end with a favorite quotation:

*"Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine,
There's always laughter and good red wine.
At least I've always found it so.
Benedicamus Domino!"*

It's a poem that for me has overtones of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and heaven ... and it's a really nice sentiment for a holiday weekend.