

Trinity Sunday, Year C
May 30, 2010
Trinity On the
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David James Duncan has written two wonderful books, “The River Why” and “The Brothers K” along with three books of essays, one of which takes its name from a famous Meister Eckhart statement; “God laughs and plays.” In that book of essays Duncan quotes Henry Bugbee, a man he terms “Montana’s late great fly-fishing philosopher” in this way: “The tenets of scripture are meant to be occasions for wonder, not the termination of it.”

Surely this is true, and it applies as well to doctrines as it does the Bible itself. That is the context in which I want to approach this Trinity Sunday Sermon; that in order for us to appreciate it properly and even to approach understanding it rightly, we need to see Trinitarian theology not as the definitive statement of the nature of God, but as a human expression of awe and wonder that the Infinite, Beyond-All-Being, Creator of all that is or ever will be, was revealed to us in a finite, being human, and that this Creator of all that is or ever will be sustains us still, right here and right now, and always has from the beginning of time to its very ending. More simply put, I hope we can begin this morning by realizing once again that the doctrine of the Trinity is more an expression of the fundamental paradox of existence itself in the face

of That-Which-Created-Existence than it is an idea that must be believed in order to be saved.

Though the Judeo-Christian traditions shows signs of disagreement about how knowable God is, every generation of biblical writers, both Hebrew and Christian, and every generation since the closing of the canon, now both Jewish and Christian, has produced people who realized that God is above and beyond all human knowing. St. Hilary of Poitiers began his very long treatise on the Trinity by declaring that even writing such a book was “unlawful,” an attempt to “trespass upon forbidden places” which exposes the mind to “the dangers of human speech.” But he wrote because Arian Christians, whom he identified as “heretics and blasphemers” – hardly charitable characterizations – had already presumed to speak of the nature of God, and their false arguments had to be countered. So he begins by declaring that God “is infinite because he Himself is not in anything, and all things are within Him; He is always outside of space because He is not restricted; He is always before time because time comes from Him.” (Bk 2, Sect. 6) And thus, “Language will weary itself in speaking about Him, but He will not be encompassed.” (2:6) concluding finally by saying: “No matter what kind of language is used it will be unable to speak of God as He is and what He is. (2:7). Only in this context did Hilary allow himself to continue writing at all, on the grounds that his readers understood the sinful presumption involved in such an effort.

I think we do well to treat all our statements about God in this vein, and to realize that the Nicene Creed, and the Trinitarian theology it summarizes, is best understood as an icon, which is to say that as with any icon it points beyond itself, to the Ineffable and Indescribable Life beyond all life, life from which all life flows. Even the famous statement in John's Gospel "he who has seen me has seen the Father" is itself an affirmation of this truth, for the context of that remark is Jesus' mild rebuke of Philip who has just asked Jesus to "show us the Father and we will be satisfied." There is, says Jesus, no direct, unmediated vision of God; the sight or vision of God is to be mediated through Jesus, who points beyond himself to God the Father. To see Jesus is therefore not so much to see God directly and without filters as it is to see the love of God made known, real, tangible in this world, just as to see the universe through the Hubble telescope is not to see God directly, but to see the effect of God's creative power. So let us say just this much today, that whatever it is to be God was revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and that whatever it is to be God continues today to sustain creation as has been so since the very beginning of time. As Robert Hunter put it, "more than this I cannot ask, faced with mysteries dark and vast, statements just seem vain at last."

To claim more than this begins to drain the Creed, and Trinitarian theology of its value. To suggest, for example, that the Creed is some sort of test that must be passed in order for a person to have a proper relationship

with God is to assert that this statement of our faith which points beyond itself to the true God is itself the face and image of God, is itself some sort of final and definitive look into the nature of God. Such a view suggests that the Creed is the stopping point in the human struggle to come to grips with our existence in the face of infinity. It isn't that, the Creed rather is the Christian starting point in that very struggle, for it is a human attempt to express in words what is fundamentally indescribable, how the infinite, while it is still and always infinite, is revealed fully and completely in the finite, how the uncreated is shown in the totality of uncreatedness to us in the created. We can say these things, but the mind can't actually make sense of them as rational propositions, because they are not. They are pointers, they are, to become redundant, icons that by their very nature seek to move us beyond such phrases into the world of awe and wonder.

None of this is to say that I believe the doctrine of the Trinity is false, except in that peculiar sense Simone Weil spoke of when she said "I am sure there is nothing whatever which resembles what I conceive when I say that word." (God.) On the contrary, as long as we use the Creed carefully, as long as we realize what we are looking at when we consider it, it is not only true, it is also remarkably useful. For it tells us that creation is entirely suffused with the presence of the divine. It tells us that in one finite moment of time the Infinite completely subsumed the finite "and became human" and that because of that

we now realize that every finite moment is subsumed by the infinite. For what else are we to say is the work and presence of the Holy Spirit except that?

I realize that in our present climate the weekly recitation of the Nicene Creed is thought to be a huge obstacle for newcomers seeking a church home. I empathize with that perspective and believe it to be true for a lot of people. But this is not because the Creed is outmoded or bad, or because it contains assertions that many modern people believe are not strictly speaking historically accurate. It is rather because new comers have no context for understanding the Creed; they have no way of appreciating what they are being asked to say. The Creed sounds to many people like an ending point, a wall up to which we walk and then stop satisfied that we have understood all there is to understand. It isn't that, and isn't meant to be that. It is window through which we look that we might just barely glimpse the point at which the eternal and the temporal meet. I must admit as much as I like the Creed and as deeply imbued as I am with the profound truth of the Trinitarian theology embodied in the Creed, I wish we could express this to new comers, and give them a chance to glimpse for themselves that point where the now dissolves into timelessness before we ask them to recite it as part of their faith. I rather imagine that would help us all to understand it better as well.

For we are in the presence of the Great Mystery. We who are bound, limited, finite, temporal, mortal, have glimpsed that which is not any of those

things. The true and human response to such a moment is not “aha, now I get it.” but rather the kind of silence that betokens utter awe and complete wonder. When in the midst of that kind of moment words at last come, such words are not attempts to explain the mystery, but to evoke the awe and elicit the wonder.

Understood aright I believe the doctrine of the Trinity does that, for it points not at itself as a sufficient explanation of the nature of God, but beyond itself to the God whose true nature is beyond human understanding. And as such it is not the ending point of Christian spirituality, the conclusion to which we all must come, but the starting point, the place from which we become “lost in wonder, love and praise.”