



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, June 11, 2017

Trinity Sunday

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Genesis 1:1-2:4a | Psalm 8 | II Corinthians 13:11-13 | Matthew 28:16-20

The late writer Douglas Adams in his extraordinary work “Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency” presents us at the work’s beginning with a rather unusual character: an Electric Monk. Adams explains, and I quote: “The Electric Monk was a labor-saving device, like a dishwasher or a video recorder. Dishwashers washed tedious dishes for you, thus saving you the bother of washing them yourself, video recorders watched tedious television for you, thus saving you the bother of looking at it yourself; Electric Monks believed things for you, thus saving you what was becoming an increasingly onerous task, that of believing all the things the world expected you to believe.”

Many of us, I suspect, faced with the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of One God in Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, would welcome the availability of an Electric Monk, or the next best thing, a member of the clergy who would believe this for you. The doctrine of the Trinity is a daunting concept. Most people feel that it is somehow important; it is after all the basis for the formula we use to baptize people. But probably most people cannot say why it is important. And it can be a kind of embarrassment, inasmuch as Jews and Muslims can get the idea that we have three gods if we can’t explain the Trinity adequately in casual conversation; whilst Hindus and others, uncomfortably for us, may find something in common with a religious system with more than one god. Have we outgrown the concept of a Trinitarian faith? Does the current tendency to dwell on God in modern sermons and to mention Jesus and the Holy Spirit less and less suggest that Father, Son and Holy Spirit is an archaic concept best left to dusty theology of the past? Now that more and more people claim to be spiritual rather than religious, is a doctrine of the Holy Trinity unnecessarily complicated and abstract?

We certainly got along without Trinity Sunday for many centuries, and some churches still do. The Eastern Orthodox churches do not celebrate Trinity Sunday. The Roman church discouraged such a celebration for centuries before adopting it. But in England Trinity Sunday became intensely popular. So we began with a feast that was officially discouraged, then reluctantly accepted, and subsequently widely observed in the West. And of course we Anglicans have a Sunday in our calendar called Trinity Sunday, today.

The term Trinity is not explicitly in the Bible. The idea of One God in Trinity of Persons and Unity of Substance or Being grows out of the not entirely happy meeting of Christian thought and Greek philosophy in the second and third centuries and later. The doctrine of the Trinity was fixed for all time by the Nicene Creed we recite on Sundays after the sermon. A lot of time has been spent on devising images and contraptions to make the idea of three distinct Persons of one Substance more accessible: for instance, the idea of God above us, God alongside us, God within us, namely, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, [familiar to us from such hymns as St Patrick’s Breastplate.] Or the image of a triangle, a favorite Anglican design, found on banners and vestments all over the world, with its unfortunate suggestion of positioning the first Person mentioned, the Father, at the top of the triangle, like a Victorian parent or a monarch; or its three-lobed version, looking rather like pickle slices; or the Eastern Orthodox circle image of the Trinity, which in some ways is better than the western triangle, but really doesn’t tell one much, and unfortunately resembles a zero. And then there are the gender issues. Father John-Julian of the order of Julian of Norwich famously asked if God the Father uses the men’s room.

It would seem that images, words, constructs that struggle to give expression to this doctrine of our faith are doomed to be inadequate. If the prophet Mohammed was right and there is but one God, and we do agree with him on that, what is the point of getting hung up on issues of gender or authority or power that arise from Trinitarian speculation?

Some modern theologians helpfully suggest that the Trinity is essentially a community, a single community of persons gathered in love. Orthodox icons, like the one in our lounge, show three persons, angels, sitting around a table and sharing a meal, and Orthodoxy can refer to that as a presentation of the Trinity.

And the great Orthodox theologian John of Damascus, of the eighth century, happily characterizes the Trinity as a single dance, perichoresis, three persons together sharing a joyful, harmonious existence, each free for the others, not free from the others, no above/below, no controlling/being controlled, differentiated by position in relationship, not by primacy of place or importance.

As human beings, can we really say that there is a self apart from relationships? A simple but profound statement was made by the writer Gertrude Stein who maintained, "I am I because my little dog knows me." We are coming in modern times to see more and more that our relationships to others, and to the ultimate Other, God, constitute who we are. In this view, relationships constitute the self. Our human lives are the product of those relationships: between parents, and between our parents and ourselves, relationships with everyone who has interacted with us, every group we have ever encountered, even with our little dog, and ultimately with God. To exist is to be in some kind of relationship. And divine life is the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As humans we encounter God's Son Jesus. And in his life and death, we encounter the love of God the Father, and this encounter with Son and Father leads to our incorporation into a relationship, a community, the redeemed community, in which we participate in the common life of the Holy Spirit, not least here this morning. In this encounter we encounter the Trinity and the Trinity encounters us.

Perhaps it is not quite time to retire the Holy Trinity as an emeritus God to be replaced by a vague but warm and benign spiritual entity floating free of what we are coming to know about the human mind and the universe we inhabit. Maybe it's not quite time to give up on what the great minds of our tradition, East as well as West, have had to say in the past two thousand years and are saying right now if we care to read the books. Maybe it's not quite time to apply for a grant to get an Electric Monk, though of course there are plenty of churches and not a few seminaries that could lend us one. After all, it's a venerable tradition to have labor-saving devices.

But rather, we are called to relationship with a living God, whom St John's Gospel speaks of in triple terms, Who was and is and is to come, and Whom Isaiah heard described as Holy, Holy, Holy, the Adonai, the Lord of Angelic Armies. Within these revelations all things are possible. This is true of the Eternal and Ever-Blessed Trinity, continually revealing God's own self, the God who comes out of the past, who walks with us in the present, and who beckons us to the truly human future where all relationships will find their true fulfillment.

Amen.