



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, May 27, 2018

Trinity Sunday

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Isaiah 6:1-8 | Psalm 29 | Romans 8:12-17 | John 3:1-17

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is as if the Protestant Reformation never happened. Or to be more precise, to see the churches of Portugal and Spain is to see a reaction to the Reformation as an opportunity to more vibrantly express Catholicism. These buildings are showplaces of the Christian story as these societies understand it and have tried to live out its teachings. Both the grand cathedrals and humble parish churches hold places of prominence throughout Iberia. They usually stand at the center of town, often on a hill top – oh how they love their hilltops.

These churches are filled with many treasures – statuary, stained glass, mosaics, shrines, vessels made from precious metals adorned with jewels, with gold leaf slapped on anything that doesn't move. All of this made possible by a history of patronage and connections to the past glories of empire. Of course, such expressions are not confined to Portugal and Spain, but could be found throughout Europe, or at least they used to be. What our Protestant forbearers saw as a general sense of excess was just one of the things that was rejected in the reforms that began 500 years ago. What gets overlooked by reformers, both then and now, is that these so-called “excesses” are meant to convey a message, tell a story, explain a difficult concept. Trinity Sunday presents us with just such a difficult concept that a piece of religious art helped me understand in a new way.

An image of the Trinity that was new to me caught my attention for its simple emotional honesty in the midst of splendor. It was a small statue of a grandfatherly figure wearing a crown representing God the Father. Such a representation, in itself, is not unique. Many artists have depicted God the Father in that way. From the top of this figure's head a cloud-like form emanates which I took to represent the Holy Spirit springing from the mind of God. Again, not particularly unusual. What is highly unusual is that the figure of the Son is the Crucified Christ still hanging from the cross while being held in the arms of the Father-figure and is shielded from above by the Spirit/Cloud form.

This is something I have never seen before. Nor has such an interpretation of the death of Jesus linked with the other two persons of the Trinity in this way, ever occurred to me. The death of Jesus, as told in scripture and in the history of religious art, is such a solitary experience, one of being abandoned by God, not supported nor shielded by God. But not for this artist. Jesus is anything but alone.

The Christ-figure in the statue has his head bowed, his eyes closed. The father-figure looks deeply grieved, but also lovingly determined to support his child in the way the father of a toddler might look as he picks up his son that has become too tired to walk. The cloud, if we can attribute motivation to a cloud, looks like it wants to wrap the other two figures in a warm embrace. It's all so intimate, as if the viewer has been allowed a glimpse of a very personal and tender private moment.

Now this is not in any way a traditional understanding of the Trinity as one Godhead of which there are three persons of one substance, power and eternity -- as an ancient text (Articles of Religion) describes it. But I stood there and wondered what a bunch 16th Century peasants thought of this image when it was new to the local church. What is it they were to understand of this way of relating to God? This is not a view of God as some lofty, unapproachable entity. What did they see? What did the artist want to convey?

Death, they were certainly familiar with. Life was short and cheap in their world. Grief, they knew plenty of that; conditions were rough. Compassion, if they hadn't experienced it directly they knew from longing for it. And in this image they are presented with a God who is familiar with all of it. This is a God who understands, first-hand, what its creatures experience. The God the anonymous artist wanted to represent – Father, Son and Spirit - is personal, not remote. Remoteness does not convey love, but being present can. And it seems that for that artist God was not a difficult concept, but a present reality. As with all human efforts to convey an understanding of God, be they artistic or doctrinal or philosophical, they strive to make God real in the lives of those who seek a God who very much wants to be found. It's a mutual effort where God is willing to meet us more than half way.

I'd like to think that a Portuguese woodcarver found what he was looking for and, with his God-given talents, produced a masterwork as a way of saying, 'thank you.' That's something every person of faith can do. It doesn't take a brilliant talent, just a recognition of and a desire to use what God has given each of us, individually. There's nothing excessive about it. How can an expression of Divine love be excessive? I imagine for that woodcarver, he thought it was the least he could do.