

Sermon for May 30, 2010 (Trinity Sunday)

The Rev John A. Baldwin

Every year on Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after the Day of Pentecost, preachers are faced with a formidable task: Breathing vitality into a doctrine (the Holy Trinity - God as one, in unity of being and trinity of persons) that is central to the Christian faith, yet seemingly remote from the day to day concerns of most people.

In the early 1960's, the Episcopal Bishop of California, James Pike, stirred up a whirlwind of controversy when he called the concept of the Trinity "excess baggage" that is unnecessary for our lives as Christians. Yet aside from the occasional troubling of the waters by theologians, no one seems to lose much sleep over the subtleties of the Trinity....God in three persons, three in one and one in three.....whatever that means.

Back in the 4th and 5th centuries, however, fierce battles were fought over the doctrine of the Trinity by early church leaders at 4 Councils (Nicaea in 325 AD, Constantinople in 381 AD, Ephesus in 431 AD, and Chalcedon in 451 AD). Good, pious people were branded heretics over theological obscurities. A church council was even wracked with controversy over the positioning of a single letter, the Greek iota. Should the word in the Nicene Creed be homoousion (being of one substance) or homoiousion (being of like substance).

What was all the fuss about? In its classic definition, the Trinity affirms two things about God. There is only one God, but that one God reveals himself in 3 distinctly different ways: 1) in the awesome power of creative energy; 2) in the decisive and purposeful intervention in human history (in the life of Jesus Christ); and 3) in the ongoing and indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, strengthening, empowering and refreshing the lives of countless human beings down through the centuries.

This doctrine is not one that was conceived overnight - an idea hatched by a theologian in a moment of inspiration - but rather an understanding of God which evolved over centuries in the heads and hearts of people who experienced God's action in their lives and history. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we find repeated references to the threefold nature of God.

Consider, for example, our Epistle and Gospel this morning. Romans 5: "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ".....(and) "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us". John 16: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.....He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine." These are just two of many passages where references to Father, Son and Holy Spirit are woven closely together.

It may not seem all that important 1500 years later, but the Nicene Creed clearly defined the boundaries of the Christian faith as monotheistic (one God as opposed to the many gods of the Greeks and Romans), and in professing belief that in Jesus of Nazareth, the God of Creation has revealed himself, and not only that, but that God's creative activity never ceases, continuing to move in, around and through people and in history through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now this might seem to be a pretty heavy sermon to be preaching on Memorial Day weekend, when thoughts of summer vacations, and days outdoors are brimming in people's minds. So I am going to conclude my sermon on the Trinity with 3 stories about fish.

This is a Trinitarian fish story. You see, theology without grounding in actual human experience isn't really useful. Preachers are always on the alert to spot the presence and activity of God in the world, and trying to draw meaning out of what they experience.

Some years ago, I drove up to Nest Lake, just north of Willmar, Minnesota to go fishing with a friend who is also an Episcopal priest. I'd never been on a several day fishing expedition before, and I said yes to his invitation more out of a desire to renew a friendship stretching back over 12 years than out of a great eagerness to fish for long stretches of time.

About a half hour after we set out in our boat the first morning, my friend hooked a 25 inch, 4 pound Northern Pike. That was the only fish either of us caught the whole day. We cooked it for supper that night. It tasted absolutely delicious. The fish weren't biting at all our second day on the lake until late in the evening, our last fling at fishing from the dock. I suddenly felt a sharp tug on my line and I pulled in a 20 inch, 3 pound Northern myself. What a thrill!! The idea of cleaning a fish at that hour of the day, however, did not fill me with delight. After a short reflection, I released it to live and fight another day, perhaps giving someone else a thrill to catch.

Not 10 minutes later, a fellow fishing on the same dock uttered a loud cry. His pole was bent nearly double. He could hardly control it. What was hooked to the other end went under the dock and a pontoon boat. He passed his fishing rod beneath the dock to his 25 year old son, and then both of them hopped into a motorboat and went off in chase of the fish. Those of us still on the dock watched with rapt attention as this drama played out. The fish came within 2 feet of their boat before the line broke. "It was a Northern all right" the son later told us, "at least 15 pounds". We marveled at the drama of the big one that got away, and wondered what it would have looked like if our fishing companion had landed the fish.

Thinking about these 3 fish stories, I discerned a little bit of the doctrine of the Trinity within them. The big one that got away is a reminder of the awesomeness of the God who created us... uncontrollable, mysterious, full of power. Even with all of our triumphs over nature, and inquiries into the mysteries of the world, God is still out there, beyond us, giving us glimpses of His majesty, but teasing us to want to experience more.

The fish that my friend caught and served up for dinner is a reminder of the sacramental meal we eat at the Eucharist on Sunday mornings...filling us with energy for living. The second person of the Trinity is God incarnate, in the flesh. God is not remote, disconnected from us and from our experiences in life, but comes to us to feed and nurture us day by day.

Finally, the fish I let go to swim another day is a reminder of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit....filled with life and energy, touching our lives and then darting away...lurking in the shallows to surprise and delight us.

To say that the whole doctrine of the Trinity is to be discovered in 3 stories about fish is, of course, about as silly as saying that the doctrine of the Trinity is "excess baggage". But as we reflect about our experience, our lives, our hopes and beliefs, we do catch glimpses here and there of God revealing himself in 3-fold ways as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier...as past, present and yet to come. Amen.