

**Trinity Sunday – June 3, 2007**  
**Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV**  
**Revelation and Relationship**

***The Rev. Kent Higgins***

Today the church observes Trinity Sunday, following logically the “completion,” if you will, of the Holy Trinity with the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, which we observed last week. In last week’s sermon, I described preaching on the Trinity as “trying to explain the inexplicable,” and yet here we are this morning.

It has, I suspect, always been a problem for people to try to find words that adequately describe the really big events of life. Many perhaps all of us, for example, have said at one time or another to someone else “I love you.” What an incredibly small word for such a tremendously big concept.

Or how about the way in which we begin the creed: “we believe in God.” What do you mean when you say “believe,” and for that matter, what do you mean when you say “God”?

Vocabulary is and always has been a limiting factor. Hallmark has made a lot of money selling greeting cards which begin “words cannot express” and then they fill in a sentiment. Words cannot express how I feel at the loss of your loved one. Words cannot express how much I love you, or miss you, and on and on.

Sometimes we invent new words to express concepts for which the existing vocabulary is inadequate. Theologians, just like other specialists, engage in this practice. So, for example, there is a word “soteriology” which is defined as “salvation as effected by Jesus Christ.” Not routinely used in my day-to-day conversation, but still, there it is.

But no matter how elegant the word, or how complex, how rooted in Latin or Greek, we still come up short. And that is always going to be the case.

We are simply never going to have the words to express those really big things of life. It doesn't stop us trying. If you have time this week, I invite you to read carefully the two creeds, the Nicene and the Apostles, which are the expression of our faith. Focus on the words, what they do and do not say, how they fit together. Observe the care with which they were constructed.

And if you really want to see a piece of work, look on page eight-hundred-sixty-four of the Book of Common Prayer for something called "The Creed of Saint Athanasius." It is a truly remarkable effort to express that which cannot be expressed, to explain the inexplicable.

The Book of Common Prayer is full of examples of language which has been carefully and lovingly worked on so that it expresses, as best it can, what we're trying to convey in worshiping God.

In its well-intentioned efforts to express the magnificence and glory of God, the Church over the ages has used language, music, stained glass, statuary, pictures – pretty much anything that could be turned to the purpose. It has also made some less than well-intentioned efforts – or perhaps that goes too far. It may be better to say that the Church has allowed images and language which were suitable for an earlier time to persist into our times, when the images no longer evoke what they once did, and the words can become divisive, not strengthening.

One of the things that has long been done is to personify, to provide human characteristics to that which lacks physical person. So God becomes "he" in the language of our liturgy, and many a person feels affronted by this apparent denial of the "feminine side" of God who is father and mother. It all gets very confusing.

Or the Church has modified ancient language and forms to address specific issues of the day. An example of this is the so-called “filioque clause,” referring to a modification of the creed from that proposed at the original Council of Nicea. Where the creed at one time said, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified<sup>1</sup>,” it was modified to say “...who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Or in Latin, “filioque.”

A well-intentioned attempt to clarify, and to address a then-current heresy, known as Arianism, which denied the Trinity and saw the Son, not as eternal with the Father, but as created by the Father and inferior to him.

But that seemingly simple change led to division in the Church, in the Body of Christ.

Eastern Orthodox theologians defined the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father and sent – on Pentecost – through the Son to us. Western or Roman Catholic theologians, on the other hand, claim that the Spirit proceeds in equal measure from the Father and the Son – “filioque” again.

I trust it is beginning to be clear why explaining the Holy Trinity is explaining the inexplicable. In part the problem is caused by the fact that it is not an easy concept to grasp, and in part the problem comes from our inability to find words with which to fully express the intimate details of God.

So do we throw up our hands in despair? Do we simply stand, as we’re going to do following this homily, to confirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed? Do we just walk away from the Trinity?

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Common Prayer, p 359.

I don't think so.

I suggest that we look at the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as a revelation of the nature of God. Yes, it is a gender-biased approach which shows the limits of the words with which we work, but if we can get past that, we can say, and I think this is the lesson for Trinity Sunday, we can say the reality of the Trinity expresses something about the nature of God.

The Trinity says that God is creator, the maker of heaven and earth. Maybe it is God the Father, or maybe it is God our Mother, the point is not one of gender but of role and purpose.

And at the same time, and in equal measure, God is redeemer in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is fully human, fully one of us, and fully divine, of one being with the Father.

And God is sanctifier or life-giver in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is about God's revelation to us, of a relationship that God wants to have with us. The idea of the Trinity expresses that God has many faces, many things to do and many ways in which to do them. God is, after all, the almighty, who was and is and is to come.

So on this Trinity Sunday I invite you, not to confusion, but to clarity, to an understanding that God is presenting himself, or herself, or it, or whatever is the right word, God is presenting himself to us, exposing his very nature to us, so that we can see his marvels in the world around us, in ourselves and in each other.

In the Trinity, God says to his people, I love you. A very simple statement of a profound and wonderful truth. On this day and every day, we give God thanks for the revelation of himself to us, and for his seeking of relationship with us.