

Sermon by The Rev. David R. Hackett
Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010

Until last Friday we had wonderful artwork displayed in the Fauber Gallery which was based on the beautiful Ely Cathedral in England. That exhibition reminded me that a few years ago Kay and I were in that cathedral on Trinity Sunday. An ancient priest very slowly climbed up into the pulpit and said, "Humph....humph....since it's Trinity Sunday I suppose I should say something about the Holy and Blessed Trinity. He then proceeded to almost put me to sleep with his sermon. Now that I am more and more an ancient priest, I guess I could say the same thing this morning. However, I hope you won't snooze too much today!

Some time ago Jay leno, of *The Tonight Show* did one of his "Jaywalking" interview sessions. The subject this night was "the Bible". Leno collared two young women and asked them, "Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?" One woman eagerly replied, "Sure! Freedom of speech." He then passed the mike to another 20-something, "OK, complete this sentence, 'Let the one who is without sin...'" The man smiled and responded, "Have a good time." Baffled, Leno, then turned to another young man and said, "OK, this is an easy one. Who in the Bible was eaten by a whale?" Out came the confident reply, "Pinnochio." I've often wondered how much editing goes into those segments. How many correct answers did he get before he got those ignorant ones? I'm afraid not many.

What about us? I'd love to do that bit here at St. John's. Instead of "Jaywalking" I'd call it "The Person in the Pew." And since this is Trinity Sunday I'd ask something like, "What is the Trinity?" And then I'd follow with the zinger, "What does it mean?"

In his novel for children of all ages, *Prince Caspian*, C. S. Lewis gives us this conversation between Aslan, the great lion, the Christ figure, and Lucy, one of the children, a daughter of Eve. "Welcome, child," he said. "Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger." "That is because you are older, little one," answered he. "Not because you are?" "I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

"Every year you grow, you will find me bigger." As we grow in faith God becomes bigger. Once we become aware of God we desire a vision of, an understanding of that ultimate reality which we call God. Some seekers try to tell us what they see. Paul Tillich spoke of "the ground of our being." John MacQuarrie gave us the threefold concept of "primordial being, expressive being, and unitive being." St. Augustine provided my favorite: "lover, beloved, and love."

But the Apostle Paul warned that all of us, even including the most brilliant theologians such as I've quoted, see only a reflection and understand only in part. He was inspired to say that in the life to come we will see God face to face – and know God as God knows us. Now, that is certainly not to say that we don't know and understand something about the divine. We haven't been left without some insight, some revelations, as incomplete as they might be.

What we do know comes from our own experience of God, coupled with the experience of Christians throughout the centuries, of much greater sensitivity than most of

us. That experience, plus God's self-disclosure, God's revelation of himself or herself: all of that enables us to grasp some truth about God's nature.

For example, we perceive that the Creator cannot be less than its creatures, that which has been created. Therefore, if *we* are persons and personal, the *Creator* is personal. That is why we Christians call God *him* or *her*, but not *it*. God is personal.

Let me remind you as we consider the doctrine of the Holy Trinity how it is that doctrine comes about. Most of the time we think of doctrine as coming from the top down, something that is imposed on us from the Church. Actually, just the opposite is true. First, there is an experience. Something happens. Then human beings, created with intelligence, ask, "What does that experience mean?" and reflect on the meaning of the experience. When there is sufficient agreement on the meaning by the people of God, the Church, then that agreement is called "doctrine."

So, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity began first as an experience. The God of Israel was known primarily as "the One who responds." Remember what God said to Moses, "I have heard the cries of my people in Egypt." And the response of God is the story of God's chosen people. Their experience of the Holy One of Israel was of the one who creates, the one who calls, the one who remains faithful, the one who liberates, the one who gives the law, the one who judges and corrects out of love, the one who promises and keeps those promises.

There's a wonderful Jewish story. When Rabbi Menachem Medel was a small child, his grandfather, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, held him on his lap and asked the child, "Where is *zeide* (grandfather)?" The child touched his grandfather's nose. "No, that is zeide's nose. But where is zeide?" The child touched the grandfather's beard. "No, that is zeide's beard. But where is zeide?" The child jumped down out of his grandfather's lap and scurried into the next room where he couldn't be seen and shouted "zeide!" Rabbi Zalman got to his feet and went into the next room. Gleefully, the child pointed at him and said, "There is zeide!"

Zeide is the one who responds when called. We know God the way that child knew his grandfather: through response. God is the one who responds.

The followers of Jesus knew the God of Israel as "the responder." *And* they had the amazing experience of God responding in a person, a person who was walking, talking, eating, and living with them. Their encounter with Jesus, and what occurred to them through his death and resurrection, called for a widened perspective, a bigger viewpoint, a larger understanding of the God of Israel. Yes, God was one. Yes, God was sovereign and totally "other". Nevertheless, in the person of Jesus they experienced something new. An experience they came to name as Immanuel, "God with us."

Their experience of Jesus was this: he acted like God! He raised the dead. He cleansed the lepers. He healed the sick. The lame leaped for joy. The blind saw. He expelled demons with his word. He taught with divine authority and wisdom. He welcomed fellowship with sinners. He forgave sins (something God alone can do). And....and...he was raised from the dead by the Father-God that he always proclaimed and with whom he said he was one.

Only after these experiences could they speak of Jesus as “Lord and Savior”, the one who is, as St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.”

Then the followers of Jesus had *another* experience of God. Jesus was given the Holy Spirit at his Baptism. He promised this Spirit to his followers after his physical departure from this world. And on the Feast of Pentecost the promised Spirit invaded the Church, empowered the Church to be the Church. Furthermore, they discovered that the Holy Spirit remained with them, just as Jesus had been with them, but his time unseen, not physical. They experienced Christ’s Spirit in them and in their community of faith. And that Spirit made all the difference in the world.

Now, these followers of Jesus, having experienced God in these three ways, asked what it meant. And as they reflected on the meaning of their experiences they looked for appropriate language to wrap around those encounters with God. It took quite a while to develop and express what their three-fold experience of God meant. In effect, what they came up with was this: There exists one personal, loving God who functions in three different ways at the same time: God as Creator, God as Savior, God as Life-giver/Life-renewer.

Remember Aslan’s reply to Lucy? “Every year you grow you will find me bigger.” God only truly knows God. But until we see God face to face, God has given us the experience which we call “Trinity”: God over us, the Creator; God with us and for us: the Redeemer Jesus Christ; God in and among us: the Holy Spirit.

Amen.