

Trinity Sunday is one of those days when most preachers would like to have someone else preach for them. The reason is that this Sunday is the only day of the year when we celebrate a doctrine of the church, rather than an event or a moment of teaching from Jesus, or focusing on a particular person. Unfortunately, when we hear the word doctrine, for most of us our eyes glaze over. So let me try to make doctrine exciting for you!

We moderns don't much like the idea of doctrine. It seems so limiting, so institutional. Nobody is going to tell me what to believe or not believe. But unless our faith is to be idiosyncratic and isolated, religion must be practiced within a particular community, which means we have to agree on a few things at least. Religion must have content, substance -- what we would call doctrine. So, like it or not, doctrine defines our particular religion. It gives it content. And of course, our doctrine is found in our creeds. Doctrine describes as best as we can what God is like and how God acts.

I think to understand what this all means, we have to understand what doctrine really is. In science you may remember that the scientific process builds on a progression of hypotheses, from which we build theories of how the world works. When theories have been around a long enough time and proven to be useful and reliable descriptions of how the world is, we call them laws. Now a hypothesis is presented in such a way that it is basically a guess as to how something works, and there is not much invested if it proves to be wrong. Once these guesses are proved by experimentation, and theories have been woven out of the answers, exceptions to the theory may create new hypotheses which will modify the theory. But when theories become laws, such as the law of gravity or the laws of thermodynamics, exceptions threaten to bring down whole fields of science. They fundamentally change the whole scientific world view. The

field of Quantum mechanics has done that to physics in the last century and a half. Continental Drift has changed how we look at geology and evolution.

Doctrine is analogous to the scientific process. In the early church there were a myriad of points of view, hypotheses if you will, of what God revealed through Jesus Christ was like. Many of these hypotheses we now call heresies, because their point of view did not “win out” because they did not reliably explain our experience of what God is like. Jesus had to be human, but that did not adequately explain his deep relationship with God, or the miracles he performed, or the rising from death or ascension into heaven. But Jesus could not be *only* divine, because he was an historic figure who dwelt among us, and to be fully sympathetic with the human condition must have experienced being human. So the theory developed that Christ had to be both fully human, and fully divine. Two contradictory thoughts, that had to be held in tension. Then we sensed that the theory was inadequate. A creator God, and a risen and now distant Christ, did not explain the experience of the continuing presence of God in our hearts and minds. We needed the Holy Spirit as well, as a guiding and sustaining presence in our lives. And so the idea of the Trinity was born. But that theory has proven to be so useful to us, so descriptive of what God is like, that over time it has become a kind of law for us, doctrine that is, and in the fourth century was written down in the Nicene creed. Each part of this theory is consistent with scripture, but the doctrine of the Trinity as a whole is not expressly written in scripture. Like much of our scientific inquiry, the doctrine of the Trinity is a man-made structure which has proven useful in describing our experience of God, at least in a limited way.

One analogy I like is comparing the Trinity to the three dimensions of space, length, width, and height. With one dimension alone, all we could draw is a point, or at best a line. Even using two dimensions, the best we can draw is a square or maybe a circle. It is still

something flat and without substance. But when we add the third dimension, we create something like a box or a sphere, something that occupies space, something real. When we describe God in three dimensions, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now we are describing something real. Of course there are many other ways to describe a box or a sphere as well – by its color, texture, or density, for instance. Likewise our description of God in the Trinity is probably also true as far as it goes, but in the long run is inadequate because it is limiting and rudimentary. I read somewhere that the great theoretical physicist Steven Hawking is able to think in twenty three different dimensions. I wonder what other dimensions of God could be added to our understanding of God as Trinity.

Another analogy I like for describing the Trinity is God as a community. It takes at least three people to form a community. And so the idea of the Trinitarian nature of God is appealing to me as a model of the church. In the Godhead, three personalities in unceasing communion with the other two, held together by truth and love, creating a unity, a synergy, that is more than each would be separately. In the church, each of us in communion with each other, creating a synergy, making each of us better than we would be by ourselves. We are held together by the glue which we call truth and love.

The Trinity is only an analogy, an approximation. The danger is that we will think that we somehow understand God if we know the Trinitarian formula, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God remains a great and awesome Mystery, who we can only know indirectly, and only in part. As Paul says, we see in the mirror darkly. We always have more to learn, more to discover about this great mystery. That is part of what makes our journey so exciting

In the gospel Jesus says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth; for he will not speak on his

own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” Jesus could not give to his disciples everything he had to give. They weren’t ready to hear it all. Neither are we. The Word of God is always living, always growing. There is always more to be said, more to be learned.

There are those who say that the Scriptures are closed, that nothing more can be added to them, that its ethics, its understanding of the cosmos, its understanding of history are set in stone. But that is to make the Bible a stone idol. It ignores the development of history, ethics, and cosmology in the Bible itself. For example, an eye for an eye was a great improvement in justice when death was the only acceptable penalty for an injury, but then Jesus went a step further and said “love your enemy.” The 2000 year old Bible cannot know the developments of science, which tell us that the cosmos is far different from the three-tiered universe which was accepted at Jesus’ time.

The Bible is certainly our foundation, our starting point, but we still have to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that the Spirit will guide us in all truth. It is always easier to look up the answer in a book, rather than having to struggle with our own definitions or challenge our cherished assumptions. The Spirit speaks in a soft voice, and we have to listen carefully. It helps to listen together. Sometimes the Spirit speaks through someone we don’t understand, someone who is different. Sometimes the Spirit speaks things we find hard to believe. We have to listen carefully, with the help of the whole church community.

But the wonderful thing, the awesome thing is, the Spirit still speaks. Our doctrine is not some dead, static thing, it is not a description of something long past. Our church is the *living* Word of Jesus Christ, changing, growing, dynamic. If we listen carefully, we may hear the Spirit calling each one of us to hear the truth in new ways, calling us to our vocation to be ourselves a

living word of Christ, calling to us to be a blessing, and to be blessed in the name of the Father,
the Son, and the Holy spirit.