

In the Beginning, God

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; Dear friends in Christ: Today, Holy Trinity Sunday, is unique among the major festivals of the Church year. Most of them commemorate important events in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation. On Christmas we celebrate the birth of our Savior; on Easter, his triumph over death; on Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit; and so on. Trinity is different because today we aren't celebrating an event, but rather a doctrine, a teaching of the Church. To be precise, we're celebrating the fact that this doctrine triumphed over many historical attempts by false teachers to destroy it and lead the Church astray. Had they succeeded, the Christian faith would have gone dark. It would have lost its power to save souls from hell. That's how important the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is.

Why? It's because every one of the erroneous formulations peddled by the false teachers made Jesus Christ something less than Almighty and Eternal God who is in every way equal to the Father. And if that were the case then someone or some-*thing* less than God died on the cross on Good Friday. And then the atonement would be incomplete, and you would still be in your sins. But by God's grace and guiding, the truth prevailed. The Gospel with its power to save was preserved. And the correct doctrine about the essential nature of God, how he exists as one divine essence in three eternally distinct and co-equal persons was kept whole and undefiled. To be sure, this is a doctrine that's not easy to understand. It's a lot to try to wrap your head around; but we receive this truth on faith because it's what God's Word clearly reveals.

Consistent with the Holy Trinity theme, the three Scripture readings chosen for today highlight the three major works of God on behalf of mankind. In the Old Testament we heard the account of *creation*, whereby the Lord called the world into existence, gave it order and light, and filled it with living things – including human beings, the crown and capstone of all that he made. In second reading from Acts we heard about *redemption*, that is, how God saved fallen mankind by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Son. And in the Gospel reading from St. Matthew we heard about *sanctification*, the process by which the Lord imparts the benefits of Christ's redemptive work to sinners by bringing them to faith and making them disciples of Jesus through Baptism and the teaching of his Word.

These three works of God, creation, redemption, and sanctification, are summed up in the three articles of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds; and in these Creeds these works are attributed respectively to the three persons of the Godhead. That is to say, the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies. But we need to understand that no person of the Godhead ever operates alone. All three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are active in each divine work – you really can't separate them. If one person of the Godhead is doing something, then the other two must be involved in some way. But for ease of explanation, the works are attributed in the Creeds to the person who's in the driver's seat (so to speak) for that particular action.

Now, it happens that for the last several weeks, what with Pentecost and the Sundays leading up to it, we've been concentrating on the Holy Spirit and his work of sanctification. Before that, throughout the Epiphany, Lent, and Easter seasons, we were focusing on the Son and his work of redemption. So what I'd like to do today is turn our attention to creation, the

work of God that we all tend to take for granted. We are, after all, immersed in it—we're part of it. If God hadn't created everything we wouldn't be here to discuss it. But because it's Trinity Sunday, a day on which we highlight the essential nature of God, rather than concentrate on *what* God did when he made all things, and how he made this on this day and that on the next; I'd like to draw our attention to what God reveals about himself in the process. That is to say I want to emphasize the work of creation as revelation of who God is and how he operates. For as God is creating he's doing more than making things, he's also telling us about himself.

We begin with the very idea of the Holy Trinity. Many people are under the impression that it's a concept that was revealed and derived much later, certainly after the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. And it's true that the precise understanding of it we have now required that fuller unfolding of the truth. Folks in the Old Testament times didn't have all the pieces of the puzzle. But they did have some sizable hints.

The very first verse of the Bible is one of them. It might surprise you to know that in the original Hebrew it contains a glaring grammatical error. Subjects and verbs need to go along with each other. You can't say "they is" or "he are"; but that's what you've got in just the first few words of the Scripture. The noun translated God is actually a plural. You know in English you make most nouns plural by tacking an "s" on the end: one hat, two hats. Well, in Hebrew, nouns have a singular form, a dual form to use when there's a pair of whatever it is, and a plural form to use when there's three or more of them. The noun for God, Elohim, is in the latter form. Under normal circumstances, it would be translated not "God" but "Gods", understanding that there's at least three of them. Indeed, when this word is used to refer to the false gods of pagans, it is translated as plural. But now here's the thing: when this plural noun is used to refer to the Lord God, it always takes a singular verb. So a very wooden translation of the first few words of the Bible would read, "In the beginning, Gods [he] created". The same thing happens a couple of sentences later where it says, "And Gods [he] said, 'Let there be light'". This is consistent throughout the Old Testament. And you'd think that Moses or some later copyist would have cleaned up the grammar to make it correct; but no one ever did. They held the revealed word in such high regard that no one dare change it.

The point to be made is that even from the very beginning, as God begins his work of creation, we're being told again and again that he is at once plural in some sense and singular in another. The same thing comes into focus later when God [he] says, "'Let us make man in our image". Who's he talking to? Who is the "us"? Whoever this "us" is has the power to create, so it can't be referring to angels or anything like that. It can only be God himself. Now, understanding the Trinity as we do, it all makes perfect sense. This is a conversation within the Godhead, presumably the Father talking to the Son and Holy Spirit. And interestingly enough, when he makes man in his own image, he makes them two, male and female, and then brings them together to form a union of one flesh: plural persons, one being – just as God is plural persons, one divine essence.

Okay, if this discussion of grammar has caused your eyes to glaze over and you've tuned me out, then come back because I'm going to move on to other simpler things that God reveals about himself by his acts of creation. The first is his eternity. We read, "In the beginning, God". That is to say, when time starts, when the clock starts ticking, he's already there. He creates time for the benefit of creation. He himself is beyond it. When we say, God is eternal, we mean more than he's always been around and always will be. With the Scriptures we confess that God is not bound by time in any way.

Next is his immense and limitless power. I mean, just look around; or consider the night sky, the stars, the planets, and the far flung galaxies – all created in an instant. God said let there be and they were. And he didn't even have to wipe his brow.

Then there's his wisdom, his knowledge, and his creativity. People devote entire lifetimes to investigating and understanding the tiniest aspects of certain things God made: like the life cycle of an insect or fish, or how a particular chemical reaction takes place in a living cell, or the intricate structures of leaves, snowflakes, and feathers. And there's always more to learn. And yet God had it all figured out from the very start. "Oh, I'll do it this way." Boom. It's done. All of it. Such knowledge boggles the mind.

And then there's his utterly astounding devotion to mankind. That's the only way to say it. I mean, God does all this creating for a purpose. And it's not for him. He doesn't need any of it. Quite the contrary, knowing the rest of the story as we do, God knows from the very start that it's going to cost him big time. All this creative work is going to hurt him in the end; but he does it anyway. He does it in order to lavish his gifts on the people he created to be the owners and benefactors of all that his hands made. The thought of it staggers the imagination. The psalmist asked in wonder, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" An equally good question is "Who is God that he would expend his time and effort on the likes of us? What kind of being does that?" It could only be one with an incredible amount of love.

What else does God reveal about himself through his work of creation? I'd like to mention two more things. The first is that he's not in a rush. Have you considered that he could have done it all in an instant? He could have begun with the finished product; but instead he drags the work of creation out over six days. He starts with something dark, formless, and empty and then goes to work on it, improving it by degrees, shaping it, and filling it with meaning and life. How? Always by his spoken word. Every time God speaks, the creation moves from darkness to light, from chaos to order, from death to life.

He's telling us something about himself: this is the way he deals with us. We come into this world born in sin. Spiritually speaking we are dark, formless, empty, and dead. And then God begins to speak to us. As he speaks his powerful word, we are brought into the light – the light of Christ whereby we know him as our loving Father, the light of Christ by which he sees us forgiven and cleansed for Christ's sake. And as he continues to speak to us through his word, he keeps on making improvements, shaping us over time, and preparing us for the day when he will give us dominion over a new heaven and a new earth.

And that brings me to my final insight; and that is that the Lord's work on his creation is inherently baptismal. Consider that the dark, chaotic earth begins submerged under the waters of the deep. It's completely passive. It is powerless to change or improve itself. But then the Lord places his Spirit above the water. We're talking local presence here – a God who though he is everywhere in a transcendent sense deigns to make himself present, reachable, and available to his creation. So, we've got the Spirit hovering over the water. And now God the Father and creator speaks. And of course when God speaks, what comes forth is his Word – his Word which we know to be not just sound or communicated information; but a person. As St. John tells us in his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling with us." The Word of God is the God the Son. Thus all three persons of the Godhead are participating in the act of creation. And when the Word of the Father is combined with water in the presence of the Holy Spirit, the light of Christ comes on.

It's Baptism. When God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit introduces himself to his creation and goes to work on it, he does it in a baptismal way. That's because that's how he deals with us. You were first introduced to the Lord when you were baptized. Then the Spirit was over the water, the Father's Word was spoken, and you were bathed in the light of Christ and given a new life. And the Lord continues to work with you baptismally: proclaiming his Word, bringing you to repentance for your sin, washing you again in the blood of the Lamb, and raising you with Christ to walk in newness of life. Your entire life in Christ is baptismal.

And that brings us back to where we started, because Baptism speaks of all three works of God: Creation (or rather re-creation), Redemption, and Sanctification by which the blessings and benefits of Christ's redemptive work are applied. Properly understood then, the first three verses of the Bible tell the whole story. The rest is elaboration and explanation of what's already been said – how our gracious God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is even now continuing his work of recreating, redeeming, and sanctifying us by his powerful Word. Therefore let his work go on in us while we give him our thanks, praise, and honor, now and forever. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!