

“Preaching the Trinity”

Acts 2:14a, 22-36

May 30, 2010

The Holy Trinity

When I was out on vicarage, I had to set up a household for the first time (as opposed to living in a college or seminary dormitory). This involved in shopping for groceries. I remember going to the grocery store to buy supplies and I ran into what I learned was called “generic food”. This was food in yellow bags and cans with black lettering that simply said “green beans” or “corn”. I was attracted to them because they were much cheaper and I was being paid only \$500.00 a month as a vicar. I ended up buying lots of generic food during that year. It seemed just as good as any other food. I could afford it. All it was missing was the brand name. And, I thought, if it tasted the same as other food and was cheaper, what difference did a brand name make anyways?

Some people would like to think of spiritual matters in the same way. They would like a nice generic deity. He could just be called “God”. You wouldn’t need the “brand names” like Allah, Jehovah, and so on. This is the kind of God many people can “afford”. By that, I mean they would set the rules for what is right and wrong, rather than have them imposed on them from the outside by a deity. Such rules are usually very light and often allow whatever we want to do anyway.

They also get to decide how a relationship with such a “generic god” is established and how it is maintained. There would be no need for guilt, repentance, change in life, or anything else that might make a person feel bad about themselves.

Such a god presents a way for unity. Everyone could have a relationship with this god. They are just taking many different and varied paths. Unity is promoted. Diversity is celebrated. Like generic food, a generic god is just as good as any other god. It just doesn’t have the “brand name” and what difference does that make anyways?

Does such a generic god work? Does he/she/it deliver what we want? What we need? Here’s the problem. A generic god causes a a lot of uncertainty. Just because we create an image

of a deity in our minds doesn't make it so. Just because we want a deity to make something happen doesn't mean it will. Generic gods can make gigantic doubts. Yet many people like this arrangement because they can be in control.

Proclaiming a specific God means we lose control. He sets the rules and the consequences for breaking those rules. He defines who is in relationship with Him and who is not. Claiming there is only one God and only one way to that one God causes divisions and is seen as arrogant, intolerant, and insensitive. Yet proclaiming that there is only one God and one way to that God can bring assurance, lead to certainty, and give hope.

So what are we to do? Believe in a generic god so that we can be happy and united together? Or, proclaim a very specific God with specific requirements on our behavior and a very specific way of salvation, even if it makes people angry, brings about persecution and causes rejection?

St. Peter was faced with that very choice in his sermon on that Day of Pentecost which our text records. He stood up to speak before a huge crowd of Jews from many different countries and cultures. This was the same man who had denied Jesus three times and, after the resurrection, had hid in a locked room with the other disciples out of fear of the Jews.

Peter could have preached a very generic message focused on "God". He could have avoided the very controversial topic of Jesus and who He was. There would be less confusion if he didn't talk about the Holy Spirit. A very generic message would have made everybody happy and kept Peter from getting to controversial.

But Peter preaches a very specific message about a very specific God. This God is Father who loves all people and had a very specific plan to rescue them from the mess that they – and we – are in. Implied in his message is a sinful rebellion by humanity for which a sacrifice or payment must be made.

Peter boldly proclaims Jesus as being both Lord (that is, God Himself) and Christ (the appointed Savior). The Father sends Jesus to this world and attests to His Sonship "with mighty

works and wonders and signs”. According to the Father’s definite plan and foreknowledge, Jesus is delivered up, Peter says, to be crucified and killed by the very people to whom Peter is speaking. This is the sacrifice for sin, the payment for trespasses, for all people of all time.

Peter goes on to say that Jesus is greater than the greatest Jewish hero – King David. David was great and rescued the people from many military and political difficulties. But David died and was buried. The people could see his occupied grave. But Jesus was different. God the Father did not abandoned Jesus in the grave or let his body be corrupted. Rather, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, loosing the pangs of death, and exalted Him to His right hand. Here was the surety of salvation, the guarantee of forgiveness, the beginning of a new relationship with God, and the initial deposit of life which continues past the grave.

Peter speaks of the Holy Spirit who was promised by the Father to the Son and poured out by the Son on the people that day. The people had seen the power of the Spirit working that day to bring the Gospel to them in their language. Shortly after the end of Peter’s sermon, the people would experience the power of that Holy Spirit in bringing forgiveness of sin and in converting people to faith through the water of Holy Baptism.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is the only church festival that commemorates a doctrine, rather than a person or event. For that reason, many people view the day as a stuffy excursion into academia in which we explain about the nature of God – that He is one, yet three; the combination of the words “tri” (meaning “three”) and “unitas” (meaning “one”) into the word “trinity” to describe this phenomenon; the separation of the three persons while maintaining the unity of the Godhead; and so on.

But Trinity Sunday is not meant to be an academic exercise or a philosophical debate. The Holy Trinity affects our lives in very real ways. For we not only teach the Trinity, but we preach the Trinity just like Peter did. Through the proclamation of the Holy Trinity, we not only know who God is, but what He has done for us.

Through the proclamation of God, the Father, we know where we came from and who we were. He created us and gave us life, as a father gives life to his children. We rebelled against Him and His lovingkindness for us. Through sin, we were separated from Him and became His enemies, doomed to death and hell.

Through the proclamation of God, the Son, Jesus Christ, we know who we are now. Like Peter's audience, we know that the Father had a plan to rescue us from death and hell. Jesus was delivered up for our sins, being crucified and killed as the sacrifice and payment for the sin of the world. We are no longer sinful rebels, but forgiven sinners through Jesus. Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father, nevermore to die, so that we, His forgiven people might live after death with Him, nevermore to die.

Through the proclamation of God, the Holy Spirit, we know how we got to be who we are now and how we will get to where we are going. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on us, although not in the spectacular manner as in that first Pentecost. He came to us in Holy Baptism and in the preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the Word of God. He has created faith in us through those means so that we have become the children of God now and, by that same faith, be the children of God for all eternity in heaven.

For many people, the only thing Trinity Sunday means is that we have to confess the longest of the three ecumenical creeds – the Athanasian Creed – and its long and hard and repetitive. But this creed is so specific because we proclaim a specific (not generic) God – who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who has carried out a specific plan to bring us to Himself now and forever. Although such specificity may not be popular and may cause us to be slandered, rejected, and persecuted, it gives us certainty in life and hope in death. For that reason, we will always believe, teach, and proclaim the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.