

"A Complex God"

Acts 2:14a, 22-36

May 22, 2016

The Holy Trinity

We seem to enjoy complex things. For example, when talking about cell phones, we can't just talk about making and receiving phone calls. We have to talk about memory chips, data plans, pixels, and so on. With computers, it's not just word processing, data bases, and spread sheets, but also RAM, terabytes, operating systems and the like. If our devices are simple and basic and don't have all the bells and whistles, we are disappointed and are not interested in using them. (That's why I'm happily confident that no one will ever steal my phone.) For many, the motto must be, "The more complex, the better."

However, when it comes to God, we want something simple and basic. We would like a spiritual being who is like us and thinks like us. We want someone who is there to help us when we need it and give us stuff when we want it, but otherwise leaves us alone. We want a simple system of morality: no hard and fast rules; just be nice to other people.

People feel very comfortable with a simple god and a simple moral system. A simple god can be very inclusive. It can be a deity who goes by many names and is featured in many religions. It can be the Muslim god, the Mormon god, or the god of American civil religion. It really doesn't matter. A simple moral system can also be very inclusive. Any and every behavior done in the name of love must be right and acceptable. Rules about right and wrong are considered to be repressive and can easily be ignored or dismissed.

It's no wonder people almost audibly groan when Trinity Sunday rolls around. Rather than commemorating an event in the life of Jesus, this Sunday celebrates the complexity of the true God by focusing on the doctrine of the Trinity. We haul out and struggle to confess the Athanasian Creed with all of its precise and repetitious descriptions of the complex nature of the Triune God.

Not only do we struggle with the complex nature of God, but we also struggle with the complex nature of His will. It is more than "be nice to other people." God has a very specific will given to us in His commandments which not only forbid us from doing all evil, but command us to do all good. The complexity comes because these commandments not only apply to our actions, but also to all our words and even to every thought.

Our text for today is the very first Christian sermon ever preached. It was preached by Peter on the day of Pentecost. After explaining the meaning of the phenomena of the day which the crowd had witnessed, Peter preaches the simple gospel of a complex God.

First, Peter proclaims the identity of Jesus of whom many in the crowd had heard. This is very complex. He was an ordinary man from Nazareth, but Peter implies that He was much more than just a man. God had declared Him to be unique through mighty works and wonders and signs which the people had seen. Jesus also claimed to be more than just a man in His teaching. For example, in our Gospel reading for today, Jesus claims to be the great "I AM" who lived at the time of Abraham. Very complex: God and man in human flesh and blood – the Son of God

Second, Peter proclaims God's very complex plan for rescuing people from the condemnation and death which their sin had earned for them. The crowd standing before Peter knew of Jesus' death by crucifixion 50 days earlier. Rather than thinking Jesus deserved to die or that He was simply unlucky, Peter declares that this was "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." So, God knew this was going to happen and planned for it to happen. Why? Why was God planning this? Why was it going happen?

Peter says, "You crucified and killed [Him] by the hands of lawless men." In other words, this happened because of them. They were responsible for the death of Jesus. But it's not because they had been in the crowd, calling for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. Many of them had not even been in Jerusalem on that Good Friday. Yet they had still crucified and killed Jesus and were responsible for His death. How? God's "definite plan" had been for Jesus to die on the cross for a very special purpose: as payment for the sins of the world. THAT'S how the people standing before Peter that day had killed and crucified Jesus: by sinning.

If that's true, you know what else that means. You have sinned – in thought, word, and deed; by doing evil and by not doing all the good God requires of you. I have done the same. That means we have killed Jesus. We have crucified Jesus. By our sin, we have put Jesus on the cross and are the reason for Him dying.

If that's all there was to Peter's sermon, Peter's congregation then and ours now would be, at best, worried about our fate and, at worst, terrified because of it. How would you feel if someone publicly proclaimed that you were personally responsible for someone's death? But that's not all there was to it.

God did something to assure them and us that what happened to Jesus was for their good and our good – that Jesus was punished for our sins so that we would not have to be punished; that Jesus died so that we would be freed from death. What did God do? After boldly condemning the people (and us by extension) for being the cause of Jesus' death, Peter boldly proclaims, "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it." Jesus was clearly more than just a man. People die all the time and death holds on tightly to them. But not so with Jesus. Not only did death not hold on to Jesus, but it could not. It was not possible for Jesus to remain dead. God the Father raised His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, from the dead to life again.

Peter quotes a prophecy from King David himself as to why this makes any difference for them or for us. David tells of not being shaken; of having a glad heart and a tongue that rejoiced; of a life lived with hope instead of despair. What brings forth all of this? The fact, according to David, that God did not abandon us to death and Hades as our sin deserved because God did not abandon His Holy One - His Son, the Christ – to death either. He did not allow the body of Jesus to see corruption – that is, to decay.

Instead of death, God has made known to us the paths of life. Instead of having sorrow and despair over sin and death, God has made us full of gladness because of His living presence among always us. We hear Him speak to us in His Word. We experience His renewing presence in our baptism. We enjoy His real presence among us in the Lord's Supper which is not a memorial meal to a dead Savior, but a feast of forgiveness, life, and hope with our living Lord who serves as the Host and the feast itself by giving us His body and His blood.

Peter emphasizes the Trinitarian nature of God in His identity and mission when he proclaims, "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing."

God the Father loved humanity despite our sin against His Law and devised a complex plan to save humanity while being true to His holiness and true to His love. God the Son became a man – Jesus of Nazareth to carry out that plan. He lived perfect in our place that we might be holy and died with our sin that we might be forgiven. He was raised from death to life as a signal that the plan had succeeded. God the Holy Spirit was given by God the Father through God the Son to humanity that they might hear the Good News of God's plan and be given faith in that plan so they could receive forgiveness, a new life now, life after death, and eternal salvation. All of that is yours in Jesus Christ!

Why is it necessary for us to be so complex and specific on Trinity Sunday? First of all, God is complex and specific – much more than we are. Therefore, any teaching or confession of the true God must be complex to be accurate.

Second, we are forced to be more specific in our confession to counteract those who promote error. We don't want to have to be complex in our confession but must in order to precisely proclaim the truth and avoid error.

Third, it is for our benefit. If you were sick and someone tossed you a bottle of pills with no name or explanation, would they help you or hurt you? It all depends. Using the wrong medicine or the right medicine in the wrong way could not only not heal you but could kill you. Depending on the wrong god may not help you at all, but may hurt you. Believing the wrong things about the right God may be dangerous to your life and soul. Therefore, we want people to know without a doubt who the true God is and exactly what the true God has done, is doing, and will do for them.

So, we celebrate Trinity Sunday, not as an academic or theological exercise, but as an opportunity to remember and confess in depth (even though we can't understand) the nature of our God and His salvation for us. Let us rejoice in the complexity of our God like we do with our phones and computers – only more so. As the complexity of our devices is a good thing which helps them to satisfy all our needs, even more the complexity of God helps Him in every way to care for us, save us, and bring us to Himself in heaven. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.