*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, Year A

# The Text: Matthew 28:16-20

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

‘And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in three persons and three Persons in one God, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the Substance’.

(Athanasian Creed)

“Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday, a feast day devoted to the mystery of the Godhead, a mystery that must be revealed in the Word and by the Word made flesh, a mystery that cannot be known by our own reason or senses. And let’s be honest here. If we were going to invent a god and a religion, we would not start with the paradox that God was three in person yet one in essence. It just doesn’t make sense. Or as the writer/apologist Dorothy Sayers put it: ‘The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Spirit incomprehensible, the whole thing incomprehensible. And that’s how it should be. Any god that fits neatly inside of your head is not God’.

I appreciate that the Athanasian Creed does not belong to a council nor does it belong to any person (it was written anonymously). It’s just there in all its glory, confessing over 400 years of theological reflection and often intense debate over what it means that God is both One and Three. How can Jesus and the Father be one and yet Jesus prays to the Father? How can the Son send the Spirit from the Father and yet there is but one God? Even in the creation narrative in Genesis, the first verses of the Scriptures introduce us to the Mystery - God, the Spirit of God, and the Word of God are all present and active in the creation. It’s hinted at in the way God speaks to Himself - “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”

But nowhere is the Mystery expressed so plainly and clearly than in the baptismal mandate of our Lord: baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Not three Names but one Name, as “Yahweh, the Lord, our God is one Lord.” And yet three Persons - distinct but not divided, coequal yet ordered. The Son begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son. Internally distinguished, externally undivided, so that where the Son is, there the Father, there the Holy Spirit. And It’s significant that the Mystery of God’s triunity is most clearly taught in the baptismal mandate of Jesus, since it is in Baptism that we learn who the triune God is and what He does to save us. Just as the Trinity was fully present and active in the baptism of Jesus - the Father speaking, the Spirit descending, the Son being baptized - so the same Triune God is present and active in your Baptism. In Baptism you are given the Name of God, and to have His Name is to have God as your God.

To our modern ears, the Athanasian creed seems unnecessarily ponderous, long, repetitive, overcooked. We won’t be told what to believe. We want to be special, just like everyone else. We want to have our gods our way and fashion them in our own image and likeness. But this creed stands in the way and says, “Whoever wishes to be saved shall confess this catholic faith.” Christianity is not a roll your own religion.

We are reminded also of the antiquity of our faith. This is old stuff. This creed was the new kid in town from the 5th century. The Nicene Creed we usually confess is from the late 4th century. The Apostles Creed into which we are baptized is from the 2nd century. The catholic faith is not made up on the fly. It’s not composed on Saturday night for us on Sunday morning. There is nothing new in Christianity. There is nothing new in the catholic faith. The only thing “new” are the newly baptized who hear the Word and believe and confess this catholic faith along with us. The catholic faith is a tradition, handed down from one generation to the next, from one believer to another, from the Church in its ongoing mission to disciple all the nations by baptizing and teaching. This is how the catholic faith is handed on and came to us - discipling, that is, baptizing and teaching. There is no such thing as contemporary Christianity or emergent Christianity or post-modern Christianity or any of the other adjectives that are piled on to the Christian faith. There is only the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith.

We are reminded today that Christianity is confessional, and Christians are called to stand up and confess with their mouths what the Spirit has implanted by the Word in their hearts. There is no room in the catholic faith for notions as “deeds not creeds” or “the Bible unites but doctrine divides.” The minute you utter a word that summarizes what the Bible teaches, you are doing “doctrine” and confessing a creed. Everyone who believes something has a creed; the only question is which one is it. Is it one of your own design or is it the catholic faith?

Some object that the words “trinity” and “triune” are not found in the Bible and are therefore not biblical. For that matter, the word “incarnation” is not in the Bible, nor is “sacrament.” This is a common trick promoted in Jehovah’s Witness tracts. Well, neither is the name Jehovah, except in the King James. Actually, one might argue that since we are quoting the Bible in English translation, none of the words we use are actually in the Bible but are translational equivalents of what the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic of the Bible say. In other words, we try to say precisely what the Bible says in our creeds and confessions.

What words would you use to describe these three Persons who remain but one Being? What analogies? Warning, they will all be wrong. Water/steam/ice - no. Father/husband/son - no, that doesn’t work. There is no analogy for God, which kind of makes sense. After all, what kind of God can be imaged by analogies? Whatever you say, you’re going to make up a word or a term that tries to hold together these two seemingly contradictory things. It’s like juggling. You have to hold all three Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - as one God, distinguishing the Persons but not dividing the Essence. And the best way we’ve found to say it is to invent a term –

“tri-une” - three and one at the same time.

So what’s the point?

If there’s one thing to be learned from this Sunday of the Holy Trinity is that God is not a means to some end, whether the improvement of the self or the betterment of society, or whatever you might dream up. All there is is God as He has revealed Himself to us. The God who created us, who redeemed us, who sanctifies us by forgiving us. The God who works through the Word. The God who is the Word. The God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into whose Name we have been baptized and caught up in the divine love of God. God is the end as well as the beginning and everything in-between. The end of all things, the goal of our salvation, the reason the Son came to die and rise, is that we might live in the life and love of God forever.

It may seem all quite confusing, as you ponder this creed with its implications. You may leave here today scratching your heads, going huh? But in the end, our confession is not by our reason, our sense, our ability to put three and one together. Our confession is a gift of grace, of undeserved kindness on the part of God solely for the Son’s sake. This undeserved gift is to know the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and to confess them in their triunity; to worship the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity and to confess the catholic faith, the faith of the apostles, the faith which the Holy Spirit works through the Word. We do not have to understand or comprehend in full, but to confess faithfully and firmly. This is a gift of God himself.

Luther taught never to mess with the hidden God. You won’t find Him and He won’t want to deal with you. Look for God in the manger and on the cross, in Baptism, in the Supper, the voice of Absolution, in the Word of Scripture. Look to the God revealed in His Son Jesus, who touches us by His human nature. And it is through Jesus, and Him alone, that we come to the Father and receive the Spirit and His gifts.

This is the catholic faith, the faith we confess, the faith we learned from the Scriptures, the faith once delivered to the saints and handed down to us.

Glory be to the Father,

Glory be to the Son,

Glory be to the Holy Spirit.

Glory to the Holy Trinity and the Undivided Unity.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen