

## **Trinity Sunday (June 6, 2004)**

The Feast of the Most Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Along with the Incarnation, the doctrine that our God took flesh and became human, one of us, it is the most mysterious, the most baffling, perhaps the most incredible of all the Church's teachings. There is a story told of St. Augustine that while he was pondering the teachings of the Church, before he had become a Christian, he was walking along the seashore one day, saying over and over to himself: "Three persons in one God, how can that be." Suddenly he came upon a little boy who had dug a hole in the sand and was going back and forth to the ocean with a shell. He would fill the shell with water and then come back and empty it into the hole. Over and over he did this. Augustine asked him, "What are you doing, little boy?" And the boy answered, "I am emptying the ocean into this hole in the sand." And very reasonably, Augustine replied, "But that's impossible." "No more impossible," said the lad, "than your trying to understand how there can be three persons in one God." Augustine went on, of course, after his baptism to become one of the great Fathers of the Church and he wrote one of the earliest treatises on what else? The Trinity.

Well, as obscure and difficult as the concept may be, it's something that we recall every time we make the sign of the Cross because we do it in the name of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. St. Patrick in Ireland used the shamrock as a symbol of the Trinity: three leaves connected to one stem. Rublev, the Russian artist, painted an icon that he called the Trinity, but what we see are three people, the three persons, angels perhaps who visited Abraham. The text in Genesis is ambiguous and it seems that these three somehow also represented God.

The idea of the Trinity came first from the experience of the people of God: the Jewish people. They experienced God as Creator, who brought us and our world into being. They experienced God as Savior who freed them from bondage and who led them to a land flowing with milk and honey. They experienced God as sanctifying, one who makes them holy. Christians would take these three attributes and, reflecting on what Jesus had taught, eventually come to the conclusion that it was not just three attributes as in

the Old Testament, but, incredibly, three persons in one God and they would assign one of these attributes to each of the three persons of the Trinity: God the Father who creates, God the Son who saves, and God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies.

But the Christians went even further in their notion of God because Jesus called God Father and he spoke of his Spirit. And so the idea of relations came in. The three persons relate to each other as family, as a community, the perfect community where each member's being consists entirely in pouring out love for the others.

Now the early theologians, like Augustine, who first started thinking about these things were not content, even knowing all this. They tried to find out more about this God, this Trinity, this life from which comes all life and from which we all are born. They asked, "What do these three in one do?" Augustine was inspired by St. John to think of the Trinity in terms of love. He said the Trinity was Lover, Beloved and Love. The Father is Lover, loving the Son into being. The Son then is the beloved of the Father and the Spirit is the Love that binds them. And it is from this love that everything else comes. Love goes out of itself in extraordinary ways. And so we have this world we live in, not only our earth but the universe with all its galaxies and miracle upon miracle that we have not yet begun to fathom.

Well, it's all very well for us to sit in awe and wonder as we contemplate this quite literally incredible mystery. But we can't be content with that. We have to ask ourselves, "What does it mean to me? What does it mean to this community which is named for the Holy Trinity?"

Well, if we follow St. John who says, "God is love" and St. Augustine who defines the Trinity as love, we have to say that love is what defines us as well, who we are, how we live and how we relate to one another and to the world that exists beyond the walls of this church. To do that let's think for a moment of another concept that the early Christian writers used to talk about the Trinity. To express the intimate relations that exist among all three how they interpenetrate one another, while still remaining distinct persons, they used the word "perichoresis." Now that word literally means to dance around, so their idea of the Trinity seems to conjure up visions of the Father, Son and Spirit joined together in a perpetual dance, dancing this world into existence, dancing all of us into life. Our love must move us to

join hands in the dance of life – old and young, rich and poor, awkward and agile, black, white, yellow, brown or red – enjoy and dance and celebrate our lives together in peace without fear, not thinking of ourselves alone, because we are not alone, but thinking of all those to whom we are joined in this dance of life, citizens of God’s kingdom, participants in God’s family, companions, sisters and brothers, born to mirror in our own lives, this Holy Trinity, born to be lovers, to be beloved and quite simply to be love! Can you imagine what kind of a world this would be if even only those of us who call ourselves Christians could live with this conviction!