

Text: John 8:48-59

Trinity: A Particular Christian Concept

Today marks a minor festival in the church year. We are not commemorating one of the events in the life of our Lord, such as Easter, Epiphany, or Ascension. We are not even observing one of the Apostles or Evangelists or Martyrs. No, today we are remembering a doctrine, one that is unique to the Christian faith and essential for the Christian faith, the Triune God. Today we celebrate the three Persons in the one Godhead. Today is known as the Feast of the Holy Trinity. In 1522, Martin Luther began his sermon on today's Gospel reading, on this festival, saying thus:

Today we mark the festival of the Holy Trinity. It is indeed true that the name "Trinity" is found nowhere in the Holy Scriptures, but it has not been conceived and invented by man. This word signifies that there are three persons in God. It is a heavenly mystery, which man's logic and reason cannot understand. This, as well as every other article of faith, cannot be based upon reason or comparisons to everyday life, but must be understood and established from the clear testimony of passages of the Scriptures, for God has perfect knowledge and knows how to speak concerning Himself.

Yes, we are marking something we do not understand. We are celebrating one of the great mysteries of the faith. There are many articles of the faith that we do not understand. For example, we do not fully understand how the world was created, outside of what God tells us in His Word. Even in the creation, the Triune God was fully involved. We read in Genesis, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:1-2). And in St. John's Gospel, we hear of God the Son's work in creation. John writes: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1-3).

Even today we cannot fully comprehend the article of faith on the Holy Trinity, but it is essential to our faith. We will confess this essential article of the faith in the words of the Athanasian Creed: "Whoever will be saved shall, above all else, hold the catholic faith. Which faith, except everyone keeps whole and undefiled, without doubt he will perish eternally. 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." In short, for one to be a Christian, one must also believe in the trinity. If a person is going to believe in one Person of the Trinity, he must accept all three Persons. While the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct, these Persons are inseparable; for to attempt to separate the Persons would be to try to divide the substance of God, who is indivisible.

Why did the Church use the word Trinity? After all, God did not give us this word in the Scriptures. Luther said in a sermon in 1532, that it is necessary to use such words. "The words trinitas, unitas are really mathematical terms. And yet, we can't talk about God without using such words. But at the same time, it is also true that when we use human language to speak about God, it seems to have a different ring to it, a whole new connotation." Luther is saying that there are certain words that the Church has used and set aside especially for her own use, words we do not use in our everyday speech.

When these words are used in church or in theological writing, there is something very special going on, namely, that the people of God are being taught, fed on the Word of God, and that He Himself is present among us. This is the Church's witness to the world that in this sanctuary, great things are happening here, for our Triune God comes to us today through the public reading and proclamation of His Word and through the body and blood of Christ, by which He comforts us and strengthens us in our faith.

For us to receive the full benefits of what God gives us, we need to be regenerated which is the one word shorthand for the phrase “to be born again.” As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” This was a concept foreign to Nicodemus, for Jews were considered believers by birth, and Gentiles were considered unbelievers because they were born outside the Jewish community. We teach as Jesus taught that to be born again one must be converted by the Holy Spirit to the Christian faith. That doesn't depend on a certain birth of the flesh. Nicodemus understood Jesus' words in human terms. He thought Jesus was saying a grown person would have to re-enter his mother's womb and go through the birthing process all over again. How else could someone become a believer unless they were reborn as a Jew? But Nicodemus was not yet born again. The Holy Spirit had not accomplished His work in him at that time. He didn't realize that Jesus was telling about the Holy Spirit's giving birth to a person's life in Christ—faith in the Messiah as their only Savior. Jesus continues to explain that this rebirth takes place through water and the Spirit; that is, through Holy Baptism in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If such a learned man as Nicodemus could not understand the teachings of the Lord, how can we expect ourselves to understand what the Lord is teaching us? Why believe in something we will never understand? We begin to look elsewhere for teachings we can accept, for pictures that are clearly drawn for us. The Trinity is a hard teaching for us to understand, it is even harder for us to accept. We believe, teach, and confess regarding the Holy Trinity, If we bear in mind that the Triune God is the only God. It is often said that all men have the same God. It is argued that Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, who die without having heard and believed the Gospel, will not be damned if they were sincere in their particular religion. Unfortunately this is untrue. The only God is the Triune God. The Jew does not believe in the Son of God and rejects the Second Person. The Muslim knows only Allah, no Son and Holy Spirit. Buddhists generally believe that God is part of everything but rarely do they take God as a separate entity at all.

All of our modern preachers who do not accept the doctrine of the deity of Christ, who make the Son a mere man, do not teach the true God. Every fraternal organization that does not recognize the three Persons in God but worships and prays to a non-descript supreme being who is acceptable to Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu, is worshipping a false god. The only true God is the Triune God, and the worship of any other is idolatry. Our Lord said: "The Father...has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."

We are here today, that the Holy Spirit would lead us to confess and acknowledge the Triune God and to continue in this Christian, and therefore Trinitarian, faith. The Holy Spirit has brought us here today to worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

worshipping Him in spirit and in truth. We did not come here on our own, but the Holy Spirit has called us to worship, for He has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, sanctified and kept us in the one true faith. He has brought us here that we may receive all the blessings of our Triune God. Our God comes to us through His Word, and we respond to Him with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. God comes to us in His entire Triune-ness, and our worship is likewise Trinitarian. We sing of this great mystery, "God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!" Our worship begins in the same way our lives as Christians began: In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. As we make confession of our sins, we hear the involvement of the entire Trinity as He forgives us: "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy on us and has given His only Son to die for us and for His sake forgives us all our sins. To them that believe on His Name He gives power to become the sons of God and has promised them His Holy Spirit. He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." In this declaration of grace we hear also the central message that our Lord has given us in the readings. He says to us: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ... For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

The teaching of the Holy Trinity is a mystery to us, but we need not worry, for our Triune God, the one true God, has given us all that we need, that we may accept this by faith. With the Festival of the Holy Trinity the festival half of the Church Year comes to a close. We have observed Christmas in honor of God the Father, Easter in honor of God the Son, Pentecost in honor of God the Holy Spirit. Today we commemorate that the greatest and the only true religion in the world presents God as three in distinct Persons yet one in Essence. May God by His Holy Spirit give us grace to confess and acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, to continue steadfast in this faith, and always to make the right practical use of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.