

2Hespeler, 7 June, 2020 © Scott McAndless – Communion

Genesis 1:1–2:4a, Psalm 8, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

This Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost, is generally known in Christian tradition as 2 Sunday. It is the day when we are supposed to celebrate the whole concept that God is one and yet is also three and that we know God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As a result, I have noticed, Christians often spend this day struggling with what is, at its heart, a basic logical inconsistency: how something be both one and three at the same time? This is the day, for example, when we get illustrations in children's stories about things that are sort of three and sort of one at the same time. I'm sure you have heard many such illustrations: the three-leafed shamrock; water in its three forms of ice, liquid and vapor; a three pointed fidget spinner.

Since that tends to be a focus on this day, I often think that people come away with the impression that, in order to be good trinitarian Christians, what you need to do is somehow get your head around this illogical concept that something can be three and one at the same time. That, I will confess, is my big problem with Trinity Sunday. We have missed the point of it all. We have reduced the whole question of the study of the nature of God to an intellectual exercise in believing something that doesn't really make any sense. And even that project often fails. Many of the metaphors and images and explanations that we use to explain the trinity are actually deeply flawed and don't quite fit with the official statements of Orthodox Christian doctrine.

My biggest problem with the way that we deal with questions of the trinity is that it is deeply unbiblical. The trinity, as we tend to deal with it, does not come from the Bible. Now, I want to be very clear about what I'm saying to you. I am a Trinitarian Christian. My doctrine does fit within the orthodox tradition of the church that goes all the way back to the Nicene Council. But, at the same time, I feel that I need to say that the trinity is not *really* in the Bible. Of course, it's not that the trinity is *not* in the Bible either. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, does speak of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit or as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer if you prefer. The Bible also has a constant emphasis on the unity of God throughout. But the logic problem of the trinity that we struggle with, that was a later invention.

The trinitarian formula – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – only appears twice in the Bible. We read both instances this morning, one from the end of the Gospel of Matthew and one from the end of the Second Letter to the Corinthians. That is it. That is where the whole trinitarian journey began. Of those two readings, the first one written was Second



Corinthians. As far as we can tell, the Apostle Paul died before any of the gospels were written so anything that he wrote is older than anything in the Gospels. So if you really want to understand how the trinity functioned for the earliest Church – what it really meant to them before it got mixed up with all kinds of other ideas and concepts – where you need to look is at the closing words of this second letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Let's understand, first of all, something about the background of this letter. Paul had founded the Christian church in Corinth. It was he who first introduced them to the gospel and pulled them together to live out their faith with each other. But then, as was his habit, Paul moved on. He continued to travel and to start other churches. But, after he left, things didn't go all that well in Corinth. Other teachers came along who didn't see things the way that Paul had and taught the people differently. The result was a church that was deeply divided and where many things started to go wrong.

Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians to try to help them and sometimes to tell them off and straighten them out. They were not easy letters to write or to receive. And that makes the closing of this particular letter particularly poignant. It is Paul's final plea for some grace, love and unity to be practiced within that church: **“Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”** He is pleading with them to just get along.

And it is in that context, with his final words, that the Apostle Paul invokes the trinity for the first recorded time in the life of the young Christian Church: **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”**

Now, when Paul wrote that, did he mean to allude to the entire doctrine of the trinity as it would be formulated by the church some three hundred years later? Of course not. He was not, in the least, concerned about the kinds of disputes that would plague the church for many centuries over what was the nature of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son and whether one was subordinate to the other. It probably didn't even occur to him that somebody might look at what he wrote here and wonder whether the God he was talking about was three or one.

Paul wasn't writing doctrine or theology. He was writing a letter. He was trying to help a bunch of people who weren't getting along very well to come together and to be reconciled with him. He does that by pointing them towards the resources that are available to them – specifically pointing them to the God that they have experienced.

I love the way that he does that. He doesn't merely point them to Jesus Christ. He speaks specifically about **“the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Why does he put it that way? They, as Christians, have come to know Jesus. They have heard the stories of his life and work. They have received the witness concerning his death and his resurrection. But what has Jesus shown to

them? What has Jesus given them that would allow them to come together in unity? Jesus has shown them grace.

Grace, and particularly the grace that is taught to us in and through Jesus, is all about treating people well even if they often do not deserve it. Jesus is the supreme demonstration of how God doesn't treat us according to what we deserve but according to God's unmerited favour shown towards us. So why does Paul invoke the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ while speaking to the troubled Corinthian Church? This is all about how they are supposed to be treating one another. He wants them to learn to treat one another with such grace – not holding past errors or insults or slights against each other. He points them to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ because he knows that such super-sized grace is the only thing that can overcome the divisions that have been tearing them apart.

Secondly, he points them not merely to God, but to **“the love of God”** – love so deep and wide and vast that God was even willing to send his son into the world in order that they might be saved. Again, what is the point of this invocation? Is it that they understand the eternal nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son? I am quite sure that Paul cares little about that at this point. He wants to plug them into the extraordinary love that God has shown to them in order that they may begin to practice that level of love with one another. Again, he knows that this is what is needed to get them out of the divisions they have built up one with another.

And finally we come to the pinnacle of this blessing: **“and the communion of the Holy Spirit.”** Now, if you know anything about the history of Christian doctrine, you will know that there has been plenty of discussion and argument about the role of the Holy Spirit in the trinity down through the ages. Christians have fought over, for example, whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son or only from the Father. In more recent times, especially since the beginning of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in the mid-1900s, the arguments have tended to be over whether and how the Holy Spirit might give gifts to individual believers that allow them to do extraordinary things like speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Now, Paul is certainly aware of those kinds of disputes about individual gifts and he actually addressed them in these letters to the Corinthians, but when it comes down to the very end of this letter he refers to none of that in the nature of the Holy Spirit. He speaks instead of the *communion* of the Holy Spirit. He speaks about what the Holy Spirit does to bring them together in one community.

This morning we celebrated communion and we did it, as you know, at a time when we could not be physically united with one another. We were divided. We were not divided like the Corinthian Christians were divided – it was not because we were struggling to get along with each other – but rather because external circumstances made it impossible for us to gather together in the same room. I know that some people have wondered whether or not that

was legitimate – whether or not we were celebrating a *real* communion when we did this. I affirm to you that we were.

When we gather under ordinary circumstances and celebrate communion, what makes *that* a real communion? Is it the fact that we eat from the same loaf of bread? Well, no, it can't be that. We decided a number of years ago that, in order to accommodate some people's dietary restrictions, we needed to make it possible for people to eat bread that had no gluten or no milk. We never thought, because of that, that we were not having a real communion. In the same way, I know that there are churches who also provide options on what people drink for communion with some preferring wine and some preferring juice. So it's not the fact that we drink the same thing either.

Nor is it the fact that we are gathered around the same physical table because we've always been willing to take communion to others when they could not come. So all of that seems to indicate that it is possible for us to take a genuine communion together while eating and drinking different substances outside of the church sanctuary.

Actually, according to reformed theology, the thing that makes it communion is the Holy Spirit. When an ordained minister like myself calls upon the presence of the Holy Spirit, often saying something like "*pour out your Holy Spirit upon these people and upon these elements of bread and wine,*" that is the moment when what we do ceases to be an ordinary shared meal and becomes a communion.

And Paul, by invoking the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Corinthians, is pointing to the incredible power of the Holy Spirit to bring people together even when they are divided – when they are divided by fighting and squabbling *and* when they are divided by physical space and even time. It is the communion of the Holy Spirit that always makes *our* communion possible and, since the Spirit is by no means limited by time or space, that is also what made our communion real communion today.

Some three hundred years after Paul wrote this letter, a group of Christian leaders came together in a place called Nicaea and they began to put in place the doctrine of the trinity. They used the categories of Greek philosophy to explain what the early church had experienced of God. The explanation was good, but never forget that the experience came first. It is when we allow **the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit** to form us into a loving and mutually supporting community that we will know the God that they knew and that is actually the only thing that truly matters.