

On the Trinity
The Rev. Amy Spagna
June 12, 2022 – Trinity Sunday
John 16:12-15

Ah, the Holy Trinity: one of the biggest mysteries of them all. It's can be hard to get it completely right, and very easy to get completely wrong.

Can I see a show of hands: Who knows what the Trinity is?

OK. Now, another question: who thinks they can explain it to someone else, in a way that they can understand easily, and that doesn't stray into the territory of at least seven wrong answers that have been established as such since antiquity? Anyone?

I thought so.

This one is hard, so hard that there are thousands of linear feet of library shelf space devoted to all the attempts to figure it out. At the heart of the problem is that our limited, human ways of knowing don't come close to what the reality is when we try to describe God. We do know a lot about God thanks to what our ancestors enshrined in the Bible; from the words of Jesus, which reassure us that the Spirit will speak in Jesus' place, and "all that the Father has is [his]" (Jn 16:13-14, NRSV). We also know a lot from the Holy Spirit's leading in our own lives and what other people continue to tell us, but none of these things quite does it in and of themselves. Karl Rahner, the Jesuit theologian whose work influenced some of the Vatican II reforms, insisted that to *begin* to approach it requires using more than a single source or methodology to come up with an understanding. That's tough to do in a graduate-level theology class, much less in the space of ten minutes or less. But, I hope that the very quick trip we're about to take through the process of how the early Church ironed out this particular and tricky piece of

doctrine will be helpful if someone asks you to explain how God can be one God, with three distinct and yet intimately connected parts.

Much of the second, third, and fourth centuries were devoted to trying to figure out what had happened in and through the person of Jesus Christ, and which of the letters, gospels, and other writings about him that were circulating should be included among the official lists of what belonged in the Bible. Communication back then was much slower than it is now, so it might take a month or two between receiving a letter, gathering some friends and trusted advisers to discuss it, and then dispatching a reply. To confess to being a Christian was also likely to get one killed, as practicing the faith was illegal in the Roman Empire until around 320 or so. However, there was no shortage of spirited debates, name-calling, and even street fights among the various groups who were convinced they were correct and their opponents were damnably wrong.

Among these factions were people like Marcion, who didn't think the God of the Hebrew Scriptures was, in fact, God; the Arians, who believed that Jesus was only a human; and the Montanists, who rather aggressively argued that the Holy Spirit and its ongoing enabling of prophecy was much more important than the "mainstream" thinkers of the day believed it was, much less were comfortable exploring. Nearly all of these arguments hinged on figuring out how Jesus could be both fully God and fully human, contained in the same package. (In Greek, that argument basically hinges on ONE letter – and it makes all the difference in saying Jesus is merely LIKE God, or made of the very same stuff as God.)

Most of the writings which were left from that time period focus on these unique and very complex problems, most especially that posed by Jesus. Tertullian, a North African bishop of the late 2nd century, was one of the first to advance the concept that the "... Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person" and that "All are of One, by unity (that is) of substance."¹ By the time the so-called great ecumenical councils started up in the middle of the 4th century, this had become the accepted position, along with the absolute necessity for Jesus to be both fully human and fully God. Without that, all of the arguments about salvation, the cross, and resurrection don't hold up to scrutiny, because, in the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, who chaired the second council in 381, "that which has not been assumed has not been saved."

So if you add all this up, and put it into a blender with some very opinionated bishops, the growing divide between the Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking halves of the Roman Empire, and the emperor Constantine's use of religion as a political tool, and voila, what you get is what we know as the "Nicene Creed," that lengthy and all-encompassing statement of the basic tenets of the Christian faith which has been a fixture of Anglican liturgy since 1549. Is it perfect? No. Do you have to believe every word of it? Also no. It's just the beginning, the foundational document on which the whole organization has grown and developed since its first draft was published in 325.

What's it got to do with us?

It can be hard to translate the God of scholarly debate to the God we know through our lived experience, and vice versa. But, we don't work on this challenge in a vacuum. We have each other, the lived experiences of God as God acts in the world,

¹ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0317.htm> [accessed June 8, 2022].

and the thousands upon thousands of pages which have been written to try to understand God. Ideally, all of these things work together to shape us, and our understanding of God.

As Rahner insisted, our understanding of God as One-in-Three "helps us to understand that in the Christian's act of faith... and in the Christian's life the Trinity is present and has to be present," and it must speak to far more than just what happens in the context of the relationships among its three Persons.² As we grow and learn, We can also trust Jesus' words about the Holy Spirit,, spoken to his earliest followers. It will help guide us into all truth despite all the ways in which the world keeps changing right in front of us. Those words help remind us of who we are, and how the interaction between us and God shapes how we respond to each successive crisis moment. They also remind us that the relatively tiny bit of information we have to go on where God is concerned is enough, and we will learn more as we are able. That, too, is part of the mystery: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now [we] know only in part; then [we] will know fully, even as [we] have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

² Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, with an Introduction, Index and Glossary by Catherine Mowry Lacugna. Translated by Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2010), 22-23.