

Reflections on Trinity Sunday

The only day on the liturgical calendar given to a doctrine is Trinity Sunday. This can be a hard liturgical event for both the laity and the clergy. People often find the doctrine difficult to understand, generally irrelevant to the concerns of daily life, even out of step with modern concerns over the use of language. Some groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, dismiss it because "Trinity" is a word that is absent from the Bible. But it is a teaching of great comfort because it assures us that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit always work together for our benefit.

The modern term "Trinity" comes from a Roman named Tertullian, who lived in North Africa during the second century. He was the first important Christian thinker to write in Latin rather than Greek. He introduced words into Christian teaching about the Trinity that became incorporated into the Nicene creed, in their Greek forms, and are still used today. These are the Latin words *trinitas* or trinity in English, *substantia* or substance, *persona* or person.

Anyone who would like to learn more about Tertullian, and other important teachers of the faith, is encouraged to consider *The 40 Most Influential Christians* by Daryl Aaron. One of my children purchased an affordable electronic version for me!

Tertullian's most important writing about the Trinity is found in a document he called *Against Praxeas* (a common naming convention at the time). Praxeas, and others, taught that there was one God that we encounter in three modes: Father, Son, and Spirit. Such a view makes common sense, as I am one person with many modes or roles: son, father, husband, pastor, professor, dog owner. People found it attractive because they could understand and relate to it.

The early church sharply condemned modalism as a heresy, or a dangerous false teaching. There are many reasons why the church in its many forms has consistently condemned this teaching, but the easiest to understand is that such a view is completely contrary to the Biblical portrait of God's activities in the world. At the baptism of Jesus, we see all three persons of the Trinity acting: the Father speaks, the Son is baptized, and the Spirit descends in the bodily form of a dove. When the idea of the Trinity is illustrated with artwork, such as the slightly garish *Holy Trinity* totem, it often depicts the three persons of the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus.



Holy Trinity

The Latin word *Persona* is often misunderstood and used in a way that is directly contrary to what Tertullian meant in *Against Praxeas*. He used it in the sense of a distinct person, such as we might see when multiple actors portray multiple characters in a stage play. Instead, people often note that *persona* was the word used to name the mask worn by an actor in a stage play who sequentially portrays multiple characters. Such a use of the word "person" to explain the Trinity

is directly contrary to what Tertullian meant. The persons of the Trinity are distinct from each other. There is no mask.

We have all seen plays and sitcoms where the characters fail to get along and are often in conflict, even if they are part of the same family (*Everybody Loves Raymond*). This is certainly true of the pagan gods that the ancient Greeks worshipped. The vital question then becomes: How do we know the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together?

What if two of the persons worked for us and one against? This consideration is not as absurd as it first appears, as an early splinter group (Gnosticism) offered a variation on such an idea. The Doctrine of the Trinity assures us that this cannot be so.

Tertullian, and later church fathers, used the word “substance” to capture the idea that there is only one God, one *substantia*, one divine will. The persons of the Trinity can never be at odds with one another because they are of one substance. There are no lesser gods who squabble when the big boss is absent.

The unity of the three Persons in the Trinity is sometimes depicted in artwork with the *Trinity Knot Symbol* (and pretzels). The three persons are depicted with the three interwoven shapes, and their unity with the circle.



Trinity Knot Symbol

For Luther, the essence of the Christian life is to listen to the Word of God and to trust it. The worst possible thing we could do would be to distrust the Word. But how do we know that the three Persons of the Trinity always say the same things to us? While such a question asked in an adversarial way might represent an almost unspeakable sin to Luther, he would be ready with an answer. When Luther preached on the Trinity, he usually took up the theme of the unity of God. The unity of God speaks directly to the trustworthiness of God and the truthfulness of God’s self-revelation in his son, Jesus Christ. For Luther, trustworthiness of God was everything.

Notes:

This week’s lectionary lessons can be found at the [Vanderbilt Divinity School library](#). They are:

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

Our thanks to Susan for offering the following three musical selections for our enrichment and reflection this Sunday:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOmsnQeNqOY>



Father Most Holy (LSB 504)

"Father Most Holy" is a beautiful song that the Lutheran Service Book categorizes under Pentecost — but I think it is appropriate for any season. Evidently I have a lot of favorite hymns, but this is one of the top ones. The text was originally written in Latin in the 10th century and was translated by Percy Dearmer (1867-1936). The tune ...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBUAQKGyc5A>



The Church of Christ In Every Age - YouTube

"The Church of Christ In Every Age" sung by the Grosse Pointe Memorial Church (MI) Virtual Choir, James Biery, director and organist. Words by Fred Pratt Gre...