

SPG#172, Trinity Sunday A

May 18, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

The Trinity is one of those scriptural truths that requires careful preparation so as to come away with a suitable appreciation of the New Testament witness. And I expect, with that in mind, that preachers and scholars would do well, in general, to work backwards. In other words they would at first take the words of contemporary theologians on the Trinity and work back to the words of less contemporary and more historical theologians, arriving finally at the biblical witness itself. And in the back of the mind of the serious student of the Trinity, there is the realization that when one does arrive at the biblical witness itself, that one will not find a doctrine or theology of the Trinity spelled out.

Alister McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, in his book, Christian Theology, an Introduction, identifies six models of theologies of the Trinity in the history of the Church.

One of his more contemporary theologians is John Macquarrie, an Anglican. Macquarrie understands the Trinity as God's contrasting ways of being. The Father is primordial or original being. The Son is expressive being. The Holy Spirit is unitive being. Macquarrie's model is seen as more existential and more describing God in human terms.

In contrast, another of McGrath's contemporary theologians is Robert Jenson, an American Lutheran theologian. Jenson puts forth the priority of God's self-revelation against human constructions of concepts of the divine. A less contemporary theologian, Karl Rahner, a Roman Catholic Jesuit from the twentieth century, says that the way we

experience God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not simply human ways of making sense of the divine. Nor are they roles that God assumes. Rather they correspond to the way that God actually is. Still less contemporary, Karl Barth says that the Trinity is the word that must be spoken before revelation is a possibility. It is the starting place for all true Christian learning. Going back many centuries from there, McGrath discusses the Trinity as presented by Augustine, and says that Augustine's ideas formed the basis of other thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. Augustine states that the action of the entire Trinity is to be discerned behind the actions of each of its persons. Humanity is not just created in the image of God, but in the image of the Trinity. Augustine stated that the Son is wisdom, and the Spirit is love. McGrath wraps up his overview of theologians having to do with the Trinity by discussing the views of the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianus, and Gregory of Nyssa. The Cappadocians played a crucial role in establishing the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. Once this was accomplished, the way was open for a full statement on the doctrine of the Trinity. They spoke of the Godhead existing in three modes of being. The Cappadocians stressed the primacy of the Father.

Finally McGrath summarizes two heresies in the history of the church having to do with the Trinity. That means that in official church councils these heretical ways of looking at the Trinity were considered to be in error. One heresy was called modalism, and was considered dangerous because it allowed for the possibility of three Gods. Another heresy, Tritheism, actually put forth the idea of three separate beings.

And so, after quickly reviewing some of the more prominent conceptions of the Trinity in theology, we find ourselves back at the New Testament itself. And in today's gospel from Matthew Jesus is speaking to his disciples. And this is after Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had found him risen near the tomb. And this is after he had told them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they would see him. And so in today's reading they have gathered on a mountain in Galilee to see Jesus, and he is there. Matthew begins by saying that they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This statement at the end of Matthew may be one of the most quoted pieces of scripture in the Bible. And many faith communities have seen it as a mandate for unbridled evangelism. And many have wondered how Jesus could be any plainer or more obvious in a command for followers to evangelize the whole world. But we must be careful in places like Matthew 28 to not assume that Jesus is making an obvious reference here, because in the bulk of the gospels, Jesus statements are anything but obvious.

And yet Matthew 28 is so quintessential Jesus. After he had sent word that they were to go to Galilee, when they saw him in Galilee, it was at that point that he sent them into the world. Throughout the gospels Jesus in answer to a question would always give more of an answer than the question seemed to call for.

Do you remember what he said when asked, "How many times should we forgive?" His answer - "seventy times seven." Or when he answered the question, "What is the greatest commandment?" and he said, "The greatest commandment is this. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul." (There is the answer to the question) "And the second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

He was always making increasingly expansive challenging statements. How about when he said, "Those who follow me will eat my flesh and drink my blood." Or when he said, "I and the Father are one." Or when he said, "Before Abraham was, I am."

And so these statements at the end of Matthew are quintessential Jesus. And so the disciples are not only called to Galilee, they are sent into the whole world. He was always saying more to them than they thought he was going to say.

And in an oblique reference to his other statements when he claimed equality with God, he says, "All authority is given to me in heaven and on the earth." And it was at this point that he sent them into the world to preach the gospel and to baptize. And again in an unstated reference to all that he had said about the Father. In an unstated reference to all that he had said about the Son. In an unstated reference to all that he had said about the Spirit, he said, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit."

Through the whole of today's gospel there is a crescendo that widens and deepens into a spiritual expansiveness that is unforeseen. It could be seen as a mandate for evangelism and increased numbers.

But in reality it is so much more than that. And even at the very end of the reading, the last words that come out of his mouth are again quintessential Jesus. "Remember that I am always with you, even to the close of the age." In other words, this Jesus who could talk about him and the Father being one, could also turn to a friend and say, "What's for supper?" How about, "I have called you friends."

And so after he had sent those who had been called to Galilee into the whole world, to preach and to baptize, he turned and said, "Remember I am always with you." Quintessential Jesus.

Could it be that the use of the Trinitarian formula here, baptizing in the name of the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, is reference to a spiritual adventure, a spiritual expansiveness that is unforeseen? I say yes. All of us are on a journey, a spiritual journey. And I say that we are all called to go back again to Galilee to hear these words of spiritual challenge and adventure.

And so the last words of Matthew are filled with an immensity and a wonder and an invitation. And from the perspective of this preacher, the real meaning of the Trinity is deeply devotional and deeply mystical for each of us and all of us. And through it all, as we are called into the immensity, as we are called into the adventure, we will live our everyday lives in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And as we do so, we will live as friends of Jesus Christ. And he will be with us, always. Amen.