

**Trinity Sunday****John 3:1-17 Loved By The Trinity in Unity**

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity. The Feast of the Holy Trinity is a relatively new festival on the Church calendar. It was first celebrated in the Western Church in 1332. It is a day set aside for us to contemplate and confess the truth and reality of who God is, what He has done and what He continues to do.

Of course, we do this every Lord's Day as we gather to worship God and receive His gifts. But this day in the Church Year is special. Unlike other feast days, which are dedicated to events or persons associated with the Church, this day is dedicated to a doctrine, specifically the teaching concerning the nature of God -- the Holy Trinity.

Frankly, the whole notion of one God consisting of three distinct persons united in one Godhead is something our limited human reason cannot grasp. But we do try. Therefore, over time, the church has developed various statements of belief to try to clarify what we understand about the nature of the Triune God. We call these statements of belief, creeds; specifically, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. The most detailed of these is the Athanasian Creed, which we confessed together a few minutes ago.

The Athanasian Creed, like the Nicene Creed, was developed to counter a number of heresies that had crept into the church over time. That is also why most orthodox churches continue to confess these creeds today. These creeds remind us, in summary form, what the Scriptures actually teach about God and His plan of salvation. They strip away all false doctrine and works righteousness and focus on the simple truth of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The Athanasian Creed focuses our thoughts on the nature and inter-relationship of the persons of the Trinity. I admit this creed can be a bit confusion, but the men who wrote it were dealing with a whole lot of false teaching from numerous sources within the church. Thus, every sentence of the Athanasian Creed addresses one of these heresies. But even such a comprehensive confession as this cannot fully reveal the mystery of the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity. None of the ecumenical creeds can fully tell us what kind of God we have, only knowing what He says and does can do that.

And even knowing these things we must agree with St. Paul who writes in 1 Cor 13:12, "Now we see in a mirror dimly; but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

While this side of heaven we may never fully understand the mystery of the Trinity, we can still give Him glory and praise because of the love and mercy He has shown to us. For it is the love of God that tells us what kind of God we have.

The reality of the love of the Triune God for us sinners is the truest expression of who He is and what He does. His love and mercy toward us is the very essence of His being, and He manifests that love in all three persons of the Trinity. And that is the focus of our message today -- the love of the Trinity for sinners, like you and me.

We see the love of God first manifested in creation. Throughout the Scriptures we are told that all three persons of the Trinity were at work in Creation. Scripture is filled with descriptions of the power and might of the Triune God during creation, but the love of the Triune God for His creation is beautifully expressed in the first two verses of the Bible.

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)

The imagery portrayed in the Hebrew text is a picture of God the Holy Spirit spreading out His arms in loving protection over His new creation, not unlike the wings of a hen over her baby chicks. His arms are outstretched as though He is carefully encircling and protecting His new-born child.

God's unconditional love for mankind is likewise made known in the Garden of Eden. It was out of His abundant love that God created man and woman in the first place. Having created them in His own image His love overflowed in them, which poured forth from each of them in love toward one another. And when they disobeyed Him, bringing sin into the world, God's love manifested itself in His mercy. Like our own loving fathers, God the Father disciplined His disobedient children. But instead of immediately ending their lives for their disobedience, He allowed death to run its course in their lives, and the lives of their children, so that His loving plan of salvation, which He spoke in the Garden, could be fulfilled by the death of God the Son, who would lovingly give His own life in payment for our sins (Gen 3:1-15).

Yes, even in the creation, and mankind's fall into sin, we see and know who God is, by what He says and does. The Father almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty, yet there are not three almighties, but one Almighty, showing love and mercy.

Throughout the Old Testament God invited His people to trust in Him and confess Him as their God, not for His own benefit, but because He loved them. For example, in Deuteronomy chapter 7, Moses tells God's chosen people...

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it was because the Lord loves you ... that [He] has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you... (Dt 7:7-9).

God saved His people from bondage for no other reason than He loved them. He released them from their slavery and brought them safely through the waters of the Red Sea because He loved them, a foreshadowing of the love He bestows on us today in Holy Baptism. Even when they made false gods for themselves, out of His great love for them, God forgave them and taught them that there is only one true God who makes Himself known through His love and mercy for His people.

Instead of killing them all where they stood with the fiery serpents, God showed His love and mercy for them by having them look, in faith, to the bronze snake that was lifted up on a pole; a foreshadowing of the lifting up of God the Son on the cross for the salvation of the world, where the love of the Trinity in Unity, would reach its climax and fulfillment.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches Nicodemus, and us, that the love of the Triune God for mankind is the foundation and guarantee of our salvation. In our text Jesus reveals the reality of the three persons of the Trinity and how each pours out the love of God for us. Jesus begins His conversation with Nicodemus by revealing the loving re-creative power of the Holy Spirit in the waters of Baptism. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.... Do not marvel that I said this to you. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:5, 8).

These words of Jesus contradict the teaching of those who think that our conversion is a result of our decision. As is made clear in the Garden of Eden, and throughout the Scriptures, our decision is always to do that which is contrary to the will of God. Yet it is always God's will that all people be saved and enter His kingdom. So great is His love for sinners that He not only desires our salvation, He also provides the means for this to be accomplished. Out of His great love for sinners, He sends forth His Holy Spirit, when and where it pleases Him, to give us new birth in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

It is clear from Christ, Himself, that we are merely passive recipients of God's grace and mercy and love as He works conversion and faith in us. It is God alone who works faith and repentance in us. As Jesus said at the Last Supper, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you..." (Jn 15:16). It is Jesus, who out of His great love for us, makes the decision for us, not the other way around. And as He clearly states in today's Gospel lesson, it is the Holy Spirit who is active and working in the waters of Holy Baptism, not us. This can certainly be confusing for us, as it was for Nicodemus, until Jesus puts it in context. He shows us that the love of the Triune God, which is manifested in God the Holy Spirit's conversion of our hearts and minds, is founded on God the Father's love for the world, which has been poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of God the Son.

Thus Jesus explains...

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 in order that the world might be saved through Him (Jn 3:16,17).

Through this conversation with Nicodemus Jesus reveals the reality of the loving, saving, work of the Trinity. He teaches us that because of His great love for sinners, the Father, who loves His Son, gives His Son, His only-begotten Son, as the sacrifice for our sins. And the Son, who loves the Father, willingly sacrifices Himself for our salvation. And the Holy Spirit, who loves the Father and the Son, proceeds from both the Father and the Son to work saving faith in us and give us new birth in the waters Holy Baptism.

Can we understand, by human reason, our conversion and the work of the Holy Spirit in Baptism? Look at the response of Nicodemus and you will have the answer. "How can these things be?" (Jn 3:9). We cannot understand the work of the Holy Spirit in Baptism anymore more than we can understand the Trinity by human reason. Concerning these things, we must heed Christ's words to Nicodemus, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (Jn 3:12). We must also heed the words He spoke to Thomas after His resurrection, "Do not disbelieve, but believe" (John 20:27).

Through the preaching of the Gospel, and the right administration of His Sacraments, the love of the Triune God is bestowed upon us, that we may be reborn of water and the Word, with sins forgiven, washed away, through the gift of faith that is given to us by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, so that by believing in the Son of God we may not perish eternally but have everlasting life. That is the kind of God we have; a Triune God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, of whom St. John proclaims, "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8).

As we contemplate the mystery of the Trinity today, we take comfort in the knowledge that we have a God who makes Himself know by what He says and does. And what does He say and do? He says He loves you, unconditionally, for Jesus' sake. Without any merit or worthiness in us, each person of the Trinity does what God does by nature -- loves, forgives, and saves sinners like you and me. He works faith in us that we may believe in the loving mercy of God the Father, the atoning sacrifice of God the Son, and sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit.

Thus, we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance, firmly believing that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; yet there are not three Gods but one God, the glory equal, and the majesty coeternal. And we rejoice that the undivided love of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit has saved us from the condemnation of our sins and given life everlasting to all who believe. Amen