

Sermon for Trinity Sunday 2011

A review of NT passages that speak more or less simultaneously of God/Father, Jesus/Son and Spirit, is instructive on two levels.

In the first place, it confirms that the later Trinitarian formulae derive from a tendency -- attested from the most primitive stages of the Christian tradition -- to use these terms almost as synonyms. While it is no doubt unfair to Paul to describe him as a Trinitarian, there is no doubt that much of our Trinitarian language derives from Paul's own choice of words.

Secondly, these texts with a more or less Trinitarian focus also show us how little attention is paid to this question in the NT era. The emphasis seems more on affirming the divine character of the blessing experienced in Jesus and now through the Spirit. While the later developments in Trinitarian theology can be defended as a extensions of the primitive Christian beliefs, the emphasis placed on theological precision and the decision to exclude as heretics those who differed in their theological definitions can hardly be justified. The ancient words of Paul seem strangely prophetic when he affirms that we are called to be "ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2Cor 3:6)

During the years before the Council of Nicea in 325 when the Eastern and Western churches were still together and a Christian emperor ruled the Empire, there was much concern over heresy - those who held other opinions that differed from the majority. One of the major heresies related to the Trinitarian formula we celebrate today.

The Emperor Constantine ordered some 1800 bishops to attend the Council in Nicea, of whom less than 400 showed up—many exhibiting the scars of torture under the reign of previous emperors. Constantine also invited Arius, who had been labeled as a heretic. Constantine listened earnestly when Arius explained the nature of his beliefs, and he was not particularly surprised when Arius burst out into a long, sustained chant, having set his beliefs to music. These chants and songs were sung by folks gathered to support him. Arius may have thought the emperor would listen more keenly to chanting than to a long disquisition on the faith:

*The uncreated God has made the Son
A beginning of things created,
And by adoption has God made the Son
Into an advancement of himself.*

*Yet the Son's substance is
Removed from the substance of the Father:
The Son is not equal to the Father,
Nor does he share the same substance.
God is the all-wise Father,
And the Son is the teacher of his mysteries.
The members of the Holy Trinity
Share unequal glories.*

The anti-Arian bishops were appalled, closed their eyes, and put their hands over their ears. It was as though in the middle of a critical debate on the future of the world, someone interrupted with nonsense rhymes or a series of perplexing and meaningless mathematical equations.

Yet the heart of the Arian mystery was in these rhymes. Arius, gaunt, white-faced, his stringy hair reaching to his shoulders, could repulse any theological argument by simply chanting one of these songs, and when Athanasius or someone else answered with a close-knit argument, there was consternation.

The creed of the Palestinian Church. the emperor accepted, and the Arians, seeing in it nothing that specifically destroyed their

position, would have accepted it if their opponents had not seen that this creed failed in any way to resolve the conflict. It was deemed necessary to state the creed in such a way that the Arians would be forced to deny their essential tenets.

Pope Alexander discussed the matter with his advisors and Constantine. Then, turning against the Arians suggested that Christ should be defined as homoousios—one in essence with the Father—and this definition should be included in the creed.

A new creed, formed by patching together the old creed which we know as the Apostles' or Baptismal Creed and a new, more bold statement of the anti-Arian position, was finally announced on June 19. It read:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, very God from very God, begotten not made, of the same substance as the Father, through whom all things were made, both things in Heaven and things in earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was

made flesh, was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into Heaven, and shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost.

And those who say “There was a time when he was not” and “He did not exist before he was made” and “He was made out of nothing” or those who pretend that the Son of God is “of another hypostasis or substance” or “created” or “alterable” or “mutable,” the Catholic Church anathematizes.

In this form, the Nicene Creed left much to be desired although there were only 3 no votes. It was tortured, blunt-edged, without the poetry or rhythm, of the creed of the church of Palestine. But many words that gave a living significance to the original creed—“the Word of God,” “the Firstborn of every creature,” “begotten of the Father before all worlds”—were in fact deliberately omitted to show that there would be no loophole for the Arians.

In its original form, the Nicene Creed was a weapon: it was to become a more sublime article of faith in time, when poetry and ornament and a less abrupt rhythm were fashioned for it by the simple process of adding words. These words, which gave depth and resonance to the Creed, were added at the Council of

Constantinople in 381, and finally approved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the last of the councils of both Eastern and Western Churches. The form of the Creed which we will use today removes the change made by the Western Church at a later council which the Eastern Church says subordinates the Holy Spirit to the Son.

I prefer to leave the mystery of the Trinity less defined and would leave the struggle over heresy to the past. While I remain a Trinitarian, I am more interested in finding common ground that will bring us together with Moslem and Jews and others who hold a belief in God loves us and who created us all.