

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

Trinity Sunday
May 30, 2010
John 8:48-59

"Mysteries Revealed"
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

For the second Sunday in a row, the church celebrates an important festival. As you know by now from the hymns we have sung and from the readings, from the children's message, this is Trinity Sunday which celebrates the mystery and wonder of our Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a celebration that was introduced relatively late in the history of the Christian Church. It is also a unique festival of the western church. It has been noted that it is the one festival of the church year not about an event like Christmas or Easter or Ascension or Pentecost, but about a doctrine—a teaching. Interestingly there are different accounts of its formal establishment. One source states that the festival was set up by Pope Benedict XI in 1305 A.D. on the Sunday after Pentecost. Another source says that Pope John XXII established the feast day for universal observance in the Western Church in A.D. 1334 on the present date.

Perhaps the reason it took so long was because the Christian church in its liturgy and hymns so regularly worshipped and celebrated the Trinity that a special day seemed superfluous.

But in our day and age, when there is confusion about God all around and when some even doubt His existence, it is most appropriate that we take the time this day to consider the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Even though one source I saw as I was preparing this sermon said one should not discuss the Trinity for more than two or three minutes without the risk of being diverted into some heresy or other. Now that does not mean that this sermon will only be two minutes long. Rather, we will discuss the Holy Trinity on the basis of the three Scripture readings for today and this theme: Mysteries Revealed. Now the mystery will not be solved like a crime is solved by a detective. No, rather the mystery will be presented as the teaching and revelation of the Lord Himself. May He bless our hearing of His word.

I. The Trinity Revealed

The word Trinity does not occur in the Scripture. It is a word rather the church used to describe what the Scripture has revealed. God is three persons and yet God is also one. Scripture teaches this, on the one hand about the unity of God in the great confession of the book of Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" and on the other hand in the words of Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Matthew: "Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." There are many, many passages that speak of the triune God. They simply state it as a fact. They do not explain. In the Second Lesson for this day we hear the preaching of St. Peter. It is the sermon for Pentecost Sunday. Indeed, the words follow directly on the account of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Peter

is preaching about Jesus and about his victory over death. He quotes the 16th Psalm that God would not let his Holy One See corruption and then he goes on speak of all three persons of the Trinity:

“This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“‘The Lord said to my Lord,
Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.’

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

The Holy Trinity is at work in our salvation.

II. The Eternal Pre-existence of the Divine Wisdom

The Old Testament lesson for this day also speaks of a mystery of the Holy Trinity. It speaks in grand poetic language of the eternal pre-existence of the divine wisdom. The Lord possessed (or “fathered”) me at the beginning of his work ... before the beginning of the earth when there were no depths I was brought forth. Before the mountains ... before the hills, before he had made the earth or the first of the dust of the world, when he established the heavens I was there. (Notice the three fold emphasis on “before”) The description here of the divine wisdom has its New Testament counterpart in the words at the opening of the Gospel of St. John, “in the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” And as this Old Testament lesson describes the divine wisdom being the divine workman beside God when he made firm the skies above and established the fountains of the deep, so St. John says, “All things were made through him and without him was nothing made that has been made.” So St. Paul speaks of Jesus as the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and can directly call Christ in 1 Corinthians 1: “the wisdom of God.” Now this is far above our understanding, for it goes to the very heart of the attributes and work of God, but again we are assured that the Holy Trinity is at work from all eternity, from before the creation of the world. We are His creation as he is “rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of men” as the Old Testament lesson concludes.

III. The Divine Son Revealed

In the Gospel lesson for this day, Jesus Himself reveals another of the mysteries of the Holy Trinity. He does it in the midst of a dispute with the Jewish leaders. They accuse him of

having a demon. He reminds them that if anyone keeps my word he will never see death. They remind him that Abraham died and the prophets as well. "Are you greater than our father Abraham?" And Jesus answers, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." They take up stones to throw at him and Jesus departs from their midst. Jesus has used the ultimate divine name for Himself. "I am" even as God revealed himself to Moses. The divine "I am" was speaking to them. And here we have the mystery of the Incarnation. The eternal Son of God, who indeed knew Abraham and spoke with him, is now the God-man, the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ whose work will be fulfilled in his suffering and death upon the cross and in his glorious resurrection. And He will send the Spirit the Comforter to his disciples and to His church. "I am" – Yes, the mystery of the Trinity and of the incarnate Son of God is revealed.

Conclusion

It is that three in one God who is at work most assuredly through his blessed Word and, in the sacraments of the church. When we began the service in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit we were reminded again of that. When a child or an adult is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, they receive God's Holy name and his blessing.

Some people might say that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a very impractical thing, a difficult thing to understand or believe. Yes, it is difficult to understand, but it is not impractical. It is the very basis of our faith. For it is the Triune God who saves us. One of the customs that has become a part of the celebration of this Sunday is to confess the words of the Athanasian Creed, the third of the great universal creeds of the church. Yes, it is longer than the usual confession of faith. Yes, it is very detailed. But it confesses without a doubt our faith in the Holy Trinity. We will confess it in just a few moments.

The whole triumphant host,
Give thanks to God on high
Hail, Father, Son and Holy Ghost they ever cry.
Hail, Abram's God and mine.
I join the heavenly lays
All might and majesty are thine
And endless praise!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.