

It is often said that Trinity Sunday is the only major feast of the Church dedicated to a doctrine. I have certainly said that, but to repeat common knowledge is not necessarily to make it true. In fact Trinity is not the only such feast. The other is the Feast of Christ the King which ends the long season after Pentecost which we begin today. What both feasts have in common is that they call us to explore the nature of God and to remind us that we are the builders and keepers of God's church, not our own.

Still, thinking about those two bookends of this exceedingly long season, I thought, not surprisingly, of a book: C.S. Lewis' children's novel, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in particular, the moment when Peter, Susan and Lucy first hear about Aslan. The other brother Edmund cannot be with them as he is being held hostage by the White Witch. Of course they have not yet actually met Aslan so Mr. Beaver, who is doing the explaining, can only give them an *idea* of Aslan.

He says, "Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"...

"Safe? Who said anything about safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Didn't you hear what Mrs. Beaver told you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He is the King, I tell you."

"I'm longing to see him," said Peter, "even if I do feel frightened."

These words turn out to be an accurate foretaste of things to come. Aslan is indeed a lion. And he is good. And he is not safe. But he rescues the children, and he saves the land from a witch determined to destroy it and he does so by sacrificing himself and finding a magic deeper than time and death.

Just as Mr. Beaver invited the children to meet Aslan, Trinity invites us, each year, to meet God again for the first time.

God is good. God is not always safe. But God saves. God is wild. To try and tame God is to kill him. And killing God reveals that God cannot be killed. But taming and killing are precisely what White Witches, or Roman emperors set out to do, and here is the fine line we walk. What we call Church doctrine seeks to explain, but if it is used to control, it can turn deadly.

Since Advent, we have been treated to so many different explanations of God. A baby in a manger who grows up and calls God his Father. Who, on the mountain of the Transfiguration, reveals himself as divine light. Who can turn five loaves and two fish into a feast for thousands. In today's gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The first Christians breathed deeply of all these encounters and more and found themselves transformed. They had wildly different experiences of the same wild God. They tried to capture it in words, but they could not, not really. So to become a Christian meant you entered a mystery you could never solve but would save you. A mystery so great that in Jesus' own words, "the powers of hell cannot prevail against it."

So what is the church think it is doing when it threatens us with hell?

For that, we have the Emperor Constantine to thank, the man who turned Christianity from a mystery into the state religion. Like all emperors and white witches, Constantine had little taste for ambiguity. Something either was or it was not. The sign *Chi Rho* "Christ is King" had led him to victory on the Milvian bridge, and that was a sign to Constantine that he owed his own power to Christ, but he also had no patience for the constant debates of bishops and mystics and

traveling preachers and street corner prophets and Alexandrians and Antiochenes, as to the nature and works of God. Constantine was a general. He wanted a straight answer.

And so the Nicene Creed was born.

And like all straight answers, Constantine and his Creed produced a great many unintended consequences. Over time, Creed became a kind of “pledge of allegiance,” a litmus test of loyalty and obedience. Mystery morphed into slogan. Into absurd beliefs like the recent idea that the earth is only 10,000 years old and that things like fossils and the sedimentary layers of the Grand Canyon are little “tricks” placed there by God to test our faith.

God does not play tricks.

And an ambiguous three-in-one God should not be taken literally.

The word “love” does not appear once in the Nicene Creed.<sup>1</sup>

Religious teachings are by their very nature hard to understand, because, and this is very important, they seek to bypass the brain entirely and settle into a different kind of knowing, the knowing of body, mind and heart, a place wider than words, even if words point to it, a place which can only be experienced. So, returning to the idea of God as Trinity, which is what we are today celebrating, there is no way anyone can explain how God can be three different persons and not three different gods, just as with Aslan, it is very hard to grasp how a wild animal can be both good and dangerous and the ruler of people. Or as theologian Fred Sanders writes, “The task of the doctrine of the Trinity is to describe the connection between God and the economy of salvation.”

Are you totally confused at this point? Good! So am I.

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<sup>1</sup> This was not in the original sermon, but revealed in our conversations after.

You can't explain the Trinity. Or how salvation can be an economy. (Which I will explore with you later.)

The Sundays following Pentecost call us every year to build the church. And if we are going to do that in a way that honors who God is, who Jesus is, who the Holy Spirit is, we need to know them. And the only way to even begin to know them is that their reality lies not in their substance, but in the relationship between them. If I try to separate the three into ones, if I see God as an entity unto himself, a stern judge, a heavenly patriarch, an angry tyrant, or even a mother hen, I have made something living and moving into a static idol. If I see Jesus as an impossible standard of human perfection which I can never live up to, I have closed myself to growing in his love. If I try to force the Holy Spirit to conform to my expectations, I risk going quite mad.

The whole point of Trinity is not to explain a doctrine, but to meet a living God.

Creation. Love. Wisdom.

God is a fathermother. God is a son. God is a relationship between a fathermother and a son. The spirit is the wind, the wind that blows through our minds, opening them, blowing away millennia of dust and cobwebs, surprising us, making the old new. The wind is the fire that touches us, like the coal that touched Isaiah's tongue, not burning, but setting a prophet's soul on fire. To know God is to participate fully in the mystery of life, the universe, and everything.

It is not all light and stardust out there, my friends, for the universe is far greater and wilder than I, while I live in a world where there is much suffering, and if, like Christ, I am here to love that suffering out of existence, I have to face it first. Or as Peter of Narnia said, "I'm longing to see him, even if I do feel frightened."

There is nothing tame about the Trinity. It was born on the cross, when the power of love faced the power of cruelty and death, where an ever-living Jesus and the controlling predecessor of Emperor Constantine had their fatal encounter. When the heart of God the father shattered seeing the agonizing death of the son he loved more than life, and his son cried out to his shattered father, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Then did the Holy Spirit come to bind their wounds and make them whole and one in their threeness, and the wild God of many forms but a single face of love showed us that in wildness is the preservation of the world, because only when we refuse to let others tame us can we love with all our heart. For love must be given freely.

And love really is stronger than death. Thus, the Trinity. Amen.