

Trinity Sunday (26 May 2024)

“And the four living creatures had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”

+In the Name...

The bishop phoned early yesterday morning. “How are you, Father?” he asked. “Oh, I am doing all right,” I replied. “I am trying to come up with something new to say about the Trinity!” There was a pregnant pause on the other end of the line. I started to laugh, probably a little too hard, to get across the point that I was joking. “Yeah, I don’t think you should be saying anything NEW...” he emphasized the last word. “Maybe say it in a *NEW WAY*...” I interrupted. I probably said last year that there is a joke amongst the clergy that most priests manage to wander off into heresy every Trinity Sunday for the first five years after they have been ordained! It is not intentional, but we tend to over-explain

things, especially in western Christianity. The Eastern Church just declares, “It’s a mystery!” While totally accurate, that might not make the most riveting sermon. But then, you are already used to those, I suppose...

But all joking aside, we are left with this rather strange feast. Well, it is not strange in and of itself, but it is conceptually difficult, or at least it is if we think about it too much. It is okay when we are children, and we learn that St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the Trinity: three persons equals one God. But then when we take a math class and we realize that except in theology, one plus one plus one does not equal one! The Church says, “That is okay, never fear, we have Creeds to help explain it!” Well, the Apostles Creed was what was believed by the apostles and was written for what the newly baptized should believe. It is the shortest of the regularly used Creeds. Because there was still room for heresy to slink in, the Church, meeting in Council gave us the Nicene Creed, and then further edited it after that Council

in Constantinople. But humans being what they are, it was still not clear enough, resulting in the Athanasian Creed, where surely the author must have gotten paid by the word!

Early in the history of the Church this feast was somewhat controversial. Not because of the doctrine itself, but because feasts were usually in honor of an event, like Christmas or Easter, or after a saint like St. Gregory of Nazianzus or Vincent of Lerins. Trinity Sunday was celebrating a doctrine, a concept, if you will.

In 21st century America it is hard to imagine anyone getting excited enough about anything in the church to cause controversy. I mean, we can understand internal disagreements over not just matters of taste like the color of the carpet or the flavor of incense, but also theological ones. But the idea that a theological disagreement could spill out of the church and actually cause mayhem in the streets is really off our radar screen.

The two saints I mentioned just moments ago were not chosen by chance but because of their concerted efforts to teach

the faith regarding the Holy Trinity when the high-placed members of the Church tried to lead Her astray. Earlier this month the Church celebrated the feast of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, a doctor of the Church and Patriarch of Constantinople in the fourth century. Frequently I hear references to being on the right side of history; Gregory was on the right side of the faith when many were not. I know I have made references to Arianism in previous sermons, which gave rise to our Nicene Creed. Arius taught that while Jesus was a really great guy, He was not divine. Tensions ran so high that when Gregory came to Constantinople to take up his see, there were threats on his life! Now, I know we can all name a clergyman or two whom we do not care for, but I trust that none of us have made death threats against one! Gregory was known for his oratory skills, so the Arians feared that he would win converts to the Truth. He converted a residence to a church, but it filled to overflowing

when he preached. He was given the title of “Theologian” because of his sermons on the Holy Trinity.

St. Vincent of Lerins is a familiar saint to many Anglicans, even though as far as we know he never set foot in the British Isles. He was French, or from Gaul rather, as it was known in the fifth century. He is famous for giving us the phrase defining “Catholic truth” as what has been held everywhere, always, and by everyone. This is the hallmark of Anglicanism: we preach the Catholic faith without the additions of the medieval Roman Church and without the subtractions of the Protestant Reformation. But of course, Vincent was not an Anglican and lived 1,000 years before the first Book of Common Prayer, so what was the context of his coining of this phrase? I am glad you asked; and by my bringing it up today you can guess that it has to do with the Trinity! He used it when writing his *Commonitorium*, which was a response to the Council of Ephesus. This Council condemned Nestorius, another Patriarch of Constantinople (that

was a tough town in which to be a bishop during the first millennium!) for denying Our Lady the title of “Theotokos” (that is, “God bearer”) and instead using the title “Christotokos” or “Christ bearer”. It is tempting to ask why that even matters, as Our Lady’s humility likely would preclude her from caring one way or another. But the heresy does not address her so much as her son. What Nestorius was saying was that Christ was not always divine, at some point, God entered into Him and then He became divine. It turns the doctrine of the Incarnation upside down making Christ God-inspired, rather than God-made-man. It divides the Son into two persons, whereas the Church teaches that Christ is one person but with two natures, both human and divine. (Each of us is also one person, but we only have one nature: human.) This ultimately denies the Trinity, a doctrine held by the Church from Her beginning, resulting in St. Vincent’s directive that we are neither to add to or subtract from the deposit of Faith. We lack the authority. Fr. Pennington, the last priest of St. Paul’s

in Bend, was fond of saying that atheism was the height of arrogance. I agree, but to tell God that we know better than He does and therefore we have the right to change what the Church has always taught, has to run a close second.

So, if you talk to the Bishop this week, please tell him that Fr. Hart said nothing new about the Trinity today! Just the same old, boring faith. But then, how could we ever classify a God Who is at the same time the Creator of the Universe, the Redeemer of the human race, and the sanctifier of the faithful, as boring?!

+In the Name...