



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, June 7, 2020
Trinity Sunday

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Genesis 1:1–2:4a, 2 Corinthians 13:11–13, and Matthew 28:16–20
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“Always with love and for love”

The doctrine of the Trinity is at one and the same time the most essential and yet the least understood parts of the Christian tradition. If you turn to the scriptures you will find allusions to it, and you will be able to find many passages that help us understand it, but to define the traditional doctrine, you will have to piece them together. What you will *not* find is that dogma carefully articulated. It was many years before the doctrine was expressed in credal form and the Nicene Creed, which we shall use together after this sermon, was not created until 300 years after the birth of Jesus Christ.

It seems strange that something so fundamental to our faith as Christians took so long to be expressed in words but, perhaps, that is the whole point – the doctrine of the Trinity is not like a scientific formula; rather, it is a way of experiencing the living God who is creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the Universe. It is through *experience* that the first Christians were led to express the doctrine of the Trinity.

As Pope Francis said in a sermon on Trinity Sunday, “*God does not want so much to reveal to us that he exists, but rather that he is the ‘God with us,’ that he loves us, is interested in our personal story and cares for each person, from the smallest to the greatest,*”¹.

This experience God as Trinity of Persons – described by theologians as the *economic Trinity* – the action of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the world and in the lives of people, leads the Church to understand the nature of the Godhead. God *must* be Three-in-one because we experience him as one-in-three. This economic Trinity is, therefore, proof of what theologians also call the *essential Trinity* at the very heart of God; that God is in essence three persons and yet one God. And this essential Trinity is also indelibly marked on the human condition. As we heard in our first readings from the book of Genesis, when God creates humankind he says “Let *us* make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:26a, 27). Men and women are called to live in community because the most perfect community is found within God as the Holy Trinity.

In our epistle, Paul talks of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, often known as ‘the Grace’ and used to close many acts of worship and prayer. The Greek word for ‘fellowship’ is *koinonia* – *communion*. Community that is centered on God is not simply playing nicely

with one another and being polite to one another; it is not even a life that reflects God as Trinity; it is *union* with God and all the responsibility that entails.

The evangelist, Jefferson Bethke reflects on this mystery, that living in community and cherishing diversity within that community reflects the image of God; he suggests that it is in our very identity to live in community since we are made in God's image. He says, *"Trying to live without community is trying to live without oxygen. We weren't created to do it."* ²

To be human is to be called to live in the life of the Trinity. To be fully human is to acknowledge our relationship with a loving Father in union with his Son Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Rowan Williams once said, *"Human beings deserve to have the fullness of their humanity engaged."* ³

So, when Communities are broken and divided; when people distrust one another; when there is violence or abuse; when people are not given the dignity of equality as human beings, those communities fail to reflect the image of God who is perfect community.

Last Sunday, on the Feast of Pentecost, like many pastors and lay leaders around America, I wrote to the parish to express our sorrow over the death of George Floyd, and the sense of outrage and anger that resulted in peaceful protests turning ugly in some cities, including our own city of New York, and even across the road from our own church. This was not simply because of the pressure-cooker feeling coming out of the lock down due to COVID-19. The anger had been simmering for years and does not seem to ever go away. Reflecting on racial tension in the United States, a parishioner emailed me and said, *"We keep attempting to find solutions to the problem, and, as well-intentioned as we may be in our efforts, our solutions don't often provide meaningful change."* Writing this week for 'the Living Church', another parishioner, Pamela Lewis, said this, *"What has felt like an unending season of injustice and anger can be rendered finite only if it is followed by restorative justice, which is eternal, and without which reconciliation and true community is impossible. Because it is informed by and deeply imbedded in the Gospel, whose unchanging message asserts that humanity is made in the image of God, restorative justice differs in significant ways from criminal justice."* ⁴

The scriptures make it plain that we are all made in the image of God and they also make it plain that God does not tolerate injustice. That is the cry of the prophets; it is found in the songs of protest which we call the psalms; it is experienced in the life of Jesus Christ when God humbled himself to come among us and reconcile us. The reconciliation that Jesus Christ brokered on the cross is *not* intended simply to change an individual person's relationship with God the Father; an "I'm alright Jack!" kind of theology. To understand that is to look at the un-penitent thief who railed at Jesus from his own cross, *"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* Selfish words. The penitent thief simply says, *"Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* To which the Lord, from the heart of his own suffering is able to respond, *"Today, you will be with me in paradise."* (see Luke 23:39-43) Even on the cross, Jesus is making community, is practicing restorative justice.

As Pope Francis said in his sermon that I quoted at the beginning, the feast of the Holy Trinity *"makes us contemplate the mystery of a God who incessantly creates, redeems and sanctifies, always with love and for love, and to every creature that welcomes him, he gives the gift of reflecting a ray of his beauty, goodness and truth."*

Always with love and for love - the opposite of teargas and flash bombs.

That, my friends, is why we need community based on the life of the Trinity. That is the hope for communities broken by years of mis-trust and prejudice. That, my friends, is why we celebrate the feast of the Holy Trinity in the hope that we will, one day, truly become the Beloved Community –the Beloved Community which is united to the Father's love, with people living Christ-like lives, and bound together by the Spirit's tether. When the Beloved Community comes to its fulfillment, it will have another name – the Kingdom of God; the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to reveal and to point the way to. The Kingdom is

not yet here – it is still breaking in. When we see glimpses of the Beloved Community, we glimpse the Kingdom; we see a different way of living – *God's* way of living – as things were always intended to be...and one day, will be.

Some words of our Presiding Bishop: *"We need not be paralyzed by our past or our present. We are not slaves to fate but people of faith. Our long-term commitment to racial justice and reconciliation is embedded in our identity as baptized followers of Jesus. We will still be doing it when the news cameras are long gone. That work of racial reconciliation and justice – what we know as Becoming Beloved Community – is happening across our Episcopal Church...That mission matters now more than ever, and it is work that belongs to all of us."*⁵ or as Pope Francis said about that mission, "Always with love and for love."

¹. Sermon preached on May 27, 2018, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

². From 'Jesus > Religion: Why He Is So Much Better Than Trying Harder, Doing More, and Being Good Enough.'

³. Interview at Resurgence Festival of Wellbeing 2013

⁴. <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2020/06/02/yearning-to-breathe-free-a-reflection-on-the-murder-of-george-floyd/>

⁵. <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-currys-word-church-when-cameras-are-gone-we-will-still-be-0>