

A Poet's Slant

Trinity, Year A

preached at St. Paul's, Henderson, June 15, 2014

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

Since Easter, we've had the chance to share some pretty exciting stuff – the resurrected Jesus appearing to one group of his disciples after another, giving them his peace, challenging them to share the Good News. Along the way, I have had the chance to share some of my own deepest, most precious thoughts. It has been a real privilege. And then there was last week's celebration of Pentecost when I couldn't be here, and you got to spend time with my, shall we say "colorful" colleague, Fr. Jim Wilkinson.

But now the extra Easter Alleluias are done for a bit, we're about to shift into the long, green, Ordinary season of the Church year, and here I am, stuck with the task of trying to explain the Trinity again. I guess I could go some other direction, I *am* the preacher. But you have to understand, preachers feel the need, if not the *burden*, to explain. All week I have been reading the comments and the illustrations and the full-text sermons of preachers from around the world, commenting on how they planned to proceed this morning. Men and women who normally would not be caught dead with a prop in the pulpit are planning to show up this morning with an egg – shell, white and yoke – or an apple – peel, flesh and seed. Others are planning on knowingly trotting out ancient heresies like one called modalism, slapping a fresh coat of paint on them and preaching about how we moderns have grown out of the out-dated need for complicated philosophical constructs like the Trinity.

I got so discouraged reading all this, that I turned instead to poetry and found an interesting thought from Emily Dickinson. The title is the same as the first line:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind --

The doctrine of the Trinity, the core value that we celebrate this morning, does just that. It tries to approach the unknowable, the unreachable, the unapproachable truth of the essence and nature of God by "telling it slant." As I have told you before, and as I'll probably keep telling you at least once a year for as long as you and our Lord allow me to stand at this desk, the doctrine of the Trinity does not so much say what God *is*, as what God is *not*.

For one thing, the Trinity declares that we don't worship some combination of gods. Most of us being of good European or Scandinavian stock, we can point to our pagan ancestors who prayed to one god for a plentiful harvest, and another for victory in war, and another for assistance in affairs of the heart. But there are plenty of folks around today who do essentially the same thing, as if we might change to a different form of God or a different way of appropriating God as easily as changing the channel on our TV. As confusing as it sounds, the Trinity tells us that we worship *one* God – God is not in competition, God is not in disagreement, God is not changeable.

Nor do we worship a God who created heaven and earth and then sat back to see what kind of mess we could make of it. From the beginning of the Church, there have been those that have asserted that the Father is a hands-off kind of guy, a skillful machine maker who then stepped back to watch how the gears would eventually wind down. There are perfectly logical sounding people, some of them publishing their work as Christian theology, that talk about this sort of god. They want to lay the burden of changing the world, or saving it, in the all too slippery

and grimy hands of humankind. By contrast, the Trinity slants toward a Creator who always is, has always been, and most assuredly *continues* to be involved in creation.

We don't worship a God who wants nothing but to be our buddy, our pal without regard to real truth or ultimate righteousness. Although it has been around for a *very* long time indeed, one of the more popular modern heresies has to do with a Jesus who was fully human yet somehow *less* than fully divine, basically an exceptionally good man, an exceptionally wise teacher. But the Jesus to whom the Church looks is more than a charismatic preacher, more than a wise moral teacher, more than a gifted worker of wonders. The Christ toward whom the Trinity slants is nothing less than the eternal Son of God, our friend, but *also* our Lord.

We don't worship a God who is the magic rabbit that we pull out of our hat whenever it suits us, responding to our every desire, falling to our every whim, jumping to our every demand. It's easy to think of God in such terms. Need the answer? Shake him up and turn him over like one of those magic eight-balls, and the answer will appear. Need a parking space? Send a prayer heavenward and one will pop up. The Trinity slants instead toward a Holy Spirit of power who moved at the beginning of creation, a Spirit who descended on the disciples as the violent wind and blazing fire of Pentecost, a Spirit who continues to enliven and empower the Church today.

So, where does all this slanting away and slanting toward put us? It could be argued that we are no closer to understanding the nature of God today than we were two thousand years ago when the Church formulated the doctrine of the Trinity. Some of my correspondents this week seem to have a real problem with that possibility, but I'm not sure that I do. Perhaps the blazing glory of God is just what Moses knew – too bright to be beheld by human eyes, and still survive. Perhaps the best we can do is allow ourselves to be swept away by the overwhelming presence of God in our lives. Perhaps the best we can do is to look at the slanted rays of God's brilliance and let ourselves be caught up in the love that moves the sun and the planets and the stars. Perhaps the real theologians are poets, and the real poets are theologians.

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my heart, and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.