

Trinity Sunday 2016 (John 16:12-15)

A sermon by Tom Frame (22/05/16)

Trinity Sunday is challenging for preachers because the expectation is a sermon on a theological concept which requires more explanation than application. But is this so? Well, partly true. The word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible. That is actually not that unusual because there are a number of theological concepts not found explicitly in the Bible that scholars and Church history and tradition have validated over the past 2,000 years. But the absence of direct teaching from the Bible on the Trinity makes it hard to find a passage of Scripture from which to launch out for a sermon. The passage we read today has hints of a trinitarian relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, but you have to look carefully for it. Furthermore, the idea of One God in Three Persons — three-in-One — is a concept we have difficulty getting our heads around. And it has been difficult for Christians from the early church down to the present.

Some attempts have failed miserably to capture the three-in-oneness of God completely. These imperfect attempts to define the Trinity became early Christian heresies. A heresy is a doctrine or teaching that is incompatible with the Church’s view of Scripture and the traditional understanding of the those who have gone before us.

The two primary heresies about the Trinity, although there are more than two, are modalism and subordinationism. First modalism: there were those who said that God was One God who just appeared in three different roles — or modalities — as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A good illustration of this is one I have heard used to describe the Trinity, but unfortunately it falls short. The example is a easy one to grasp. I am Tom Frame, but I am husband to Helen, father to Megan and Kelly, and small time beef producer from Tarago. So, I am one person in three roles. But while this sort of gets at one aspect of the Trinity, it is actually a good example of the heresy of “modalism” — one god playing three different parts.

The other heresy is that God the Father is the supreme figure, while both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to him in some way. But the early Church developed creedal statements that expressed what the Church believed that included detailed explanation of the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. These details were included to correct the notion that God the Father was superior to God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. The “essence” of all three persons of the Godhead was, in other words, the same.

But it’s one thing to assert something about the Trinity, to say we believe in the Triune God, and to embrace a doctrine we cannot fully comprehend or explain. It is another thing entirely to base our understanding of God on what we see God doing. So, let me make the most important statement about the Trinity that I can make this morning, and that is — Our understanding of the Trinity is based on what we see God has done and is doing in the world. Let me give you some examples.

In the Old Testament, God is Creator of both the world, and of the nation of Israel through whom he will bless the world. Of course, God is present as Spirit, and the Messiah is both prophesied and foreshadowed in various theophanies (appearances of God, such as the angel who wrestles with Jacob). But primary on the stage of the unfolding drama of the Old Testament is the God of Israel, Yahweh, El-Shaddai, Elohim, Adonai, and all the other names by which God is called and worshipped.

In the New Testament Gospel accounts, the emphasis is upon Jesus — his birth, his baptism, his message, his life, his death, and his resurrection. But God the Father approves his Son, and the Holy Spirit descends upon — anoints — Jesus for ministry. In the New Testament Book of Acts and the epistles, the Holy Spirit is at the forefront, equipping, enabling, guiding, empowering the early church. In the Book of Revelation, God the Father, Son, and Spirit are all present, each featured in a way that is both consistent with the Old Testament, witnesses to the New Testament, and brings fully into being the Kingdom of God in its closing chapters.

That surveys the “What is the Trinity?” question, even though I am sure you probably have more questions now than when we began. But to keep this from being merely an academic exercise, we need to turn our attention to “Why do we care?” This is what’s important and what we need to understand. Doctrine is important, but doctrine comes from the lived experiences of God’s people as they interpret the work of God in the real world.

First, the reason we should care about the Trinity, and be aware of the uniqueness of the One-in-Three and Three-in-One is this: Without a balanced view of all three persons of the Trinity, we can misinterpret the work of God in this world. For instance, if we emphasize some aspects of God in the Old Testament, and subordinate Jesus and the Spirit, then we come away with a picture of a god of wrath and judgment, who has little compassion. I published an article some years ago condemning the Melbourne Pentecostal pastor who claimed that the Black Saturday fires in Victoria were an expression of God’s wrath at changes to Victoria’s abortion laws.

If we emphasize the person of Jesus to the exclusion of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, we miss out on the fact that God sent Jesus because “God so loved the world...” The purpose of God is to redeem the world, not just the individuals in it. Salvation is the work of God, and that salvation extends not just to individuals but to God’s creation as well. Another famous and trendy preacher was quoted as saying that Jesus is coming back to burn up the world, so he can drive a huge SUV because he’s not worried about this physical earth. Not a good theological position, in my estimation.

Finally, if we emphasize the Holy Spirit, and the charismatic experiences and gifts of the Spirit, it is easy to lose sight of God as Creator, Son as Redeemer, and the role that the Holy Spirit played and plays in both of those aspects of God’s work. So, that’s the downside of why the Trinity is important to us. But what’s the upside, what are the positive reasons we need to care about developing our own understanding of the Trinity.

First, in the doctrine of the Trinity, we find our model for community. As God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit relate to one another, demonstrate love for each other, and work in concert to accomplish the purpose of God in the world, we get the idea of community. This idea of the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit has been depicted by many Christian scholars using the term “perichoresis.” That’s a Greek word which means, literally, “dancing around.” I like the implications of God — Father, Son, and Spirit — in a divine dance, interacting with one another, expressing love for one another, and complementing the work each has to do.

In the Gospel we read today, we find some of these elements of mutuality. Jesus says that the Spirit will guide his disciples, glorify Jesus, take what belongs to Jesus and give it to the disciples. But, everything Jesus has comes from the Father, and that is why the Spirit can make it known to the disciples. If that sounds like circular reasoning, it is. God the Father creates, God the Son redeems, God the Spirit illuminates and equips. In this divine dance of mutuality, each person of the Godhead complements and builds on the work of other members of the Trinity. So, at the baptism of Jesus, Jesus demonstrates his obedience to the plan of God through baptism. God the Father announces his approval, and the Holy Spirit anoints Jesus for ministry. In the early church, the Spirit empowers, equips, and emboldens the apostles to tell the good news of Jesus, who is God’s gift sent into the world to redeem it.

Secondly, in the doctrine of the Trinity, we find our mission. Jesus stated to the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” Just as God the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sends us into the world to do the Father’s work, equipped and accompanied by the Spirit of God. God’s work involves more than taking individuals to heaven when they die. God’s work is to bring in his kingdom on this earth, so that God’s creation can know the shalom of God — the peace that says all things are as God has intended them to be. So, God sends Jesus to bring the shalom of God — also called salvation — to the nation of Israel and to all who will respond, whether Jew or not. Which is why Jesus teaches his disciples to pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The Father and Son then send the Spirit who equips, empowers, and emboldens the early apostles as well as us today.

And, salvation itself — the idea that we are right with God — proceeds from God, is incarnate in Jesus, and is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. Whatever work we have to do in this world, we do from the standpoint of the Triune God — Father, Son and Spirit — who created, redeemed, and enabled us to do so.

So, let me encourage you today to think about the Trinity — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But we can’t stop at just thinking about a theological concept. As followers of Jesus, we are loved by the Father, and led by the Spirit. All three persons of the Godhead are at work in our lives, in the life of this church, and in the life of this world. As we live in new awareness of God in all God’s expressions as Father, Son, and Spirit, our spiritual lives will deepen, our vision of God’s kingdom will expand, and the work that God has chosen for us will take on a new vitality and urgency.