

**Trinity Sunday  
May 18, 2008**

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**In *The Sign of Four*, Arthur Conan Doyle penned one of Sherlock Holmes' more memorable lines: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth." Hold on to that thought as we discuss the Trinity for a while.**

**Today the church celebrates what used to be called a First-class feast. It is a solemnity not in honor not of an event, nor even of a person, but a feast in honor of a doctrine, a theological construct, the Trinity. We celebrate a very high abstraction, but one that is at the heart of the One whom we call our God.**

**The word Trinity is never used in the bible. It was never uttered by Jesus; in fact Jesus, like all Jews of his time, would probably have considered the notion blasphemous. Indeed, some of you heard last week in song the most ancient and sacrosanct conviction of Judaism: "Hear O Israel. The Lord your God is one." For Jesus and his contemporary Jewish followers, their question could never have been: was Jesus another God? He could not be. And yet, empowered by the Holy Spirit Jesus said he was leaving them, they grew in their conviction that Jesus enjoyed a unique and co-equal relationship with**

**God. But how?**

**Over the past few weeks I have really enjoyed re-immersing myself in Trinitarian theology. I had forgotten just how bewildering and frankly bizarre it can become. There are “emanations and processions,” the Greek philosophical concepts of *ousias* (meaning one in essence) and *hypostases* (meaning distinct “persons,” but not persons as you and I understand that word). The language is about as sophisticated and complex as it can get. I found it almost humorous re-reading the attempts we have made over the past two thousand years. Some are brilliant; some just bizarre. But they all convince an intelligent person of the impossibility of doing God justice by trying to talk about God. We simply ask too much of language. I was reminded of T.S. Eliot who wrote: “...words strain / Crack and sometimes break under the burden, Under the tension, slip, slide, perish / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place.” He captured the church’s dilemma well: Our words will always pale beside the reality.**

**Add to this the common wisdom among both theologians and preachers that if you talk about the Trinity for more than a few minutes, you are bound to fall into heresy. There are at least ten or twelve common heresies that account for only the first 500 years of the church. And many are still alive**

and quite well. There still live Arianism, and Docetism, and a whole host of other “isms,” all condemned.

There is another piece of common wisdom for preachers about the Trinity. Don’t plan on talking too much about it or the snores will overwhelm you. In fact, Karl Rahner, one of the most distinguished theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, once said: “if it were said one day from the pulpit that the doctrine of the Trinity had been rescinded, recanted, abrogated, it would make no difference whatsoever to the typical person in the pew.” It can get that dense, friends.

I have probably already gone over my time limit of a few minutes, and have you wondering, no doubt, why we even bother to talk about it in the first place? Because we enjoy a challenge here at St. Ignatius, and we all deserve at least an intellectual bone to gnaw-on for the rest of the day.

Given the ineffability and unfathomable nature of the mystery the church has tried to articulate, it is not surprising that so many have turned to images rather than language. The most famous is probably St. Patrick’s shamrock: three petals, one leaf. Then there are the three interlocking circles, sort of like the Olympic flag minus a few rings. Then there were the interlocking “fish-like” emblems that appeared on so many Medieval

cathedrals. Not least, of course, came the musical analogies. (Cathy or Timothy: can we have a sequential C maj. Chord?) Three notes; one chord.

There, is that clear now? No, of course not. Because while all are interesting images, none of them is really accurate. None ever will be accurate. And yet from the earliest written records of the church, and in all three readings today, (in Moses' God of the Covenant and creation, in Jesus' depiction as the "only Son of the Father" in John's gospel, and in Paul's gracious Spirit in Corinth) there is a growing conviction that it is our whole *way of thinking* about God that has to change. God is not—and never will be—what we think God to be. And when we realize that God is so much bigger, so much greater, so much more enmeshed and en-fleshed in our own little worlds, we can begin to realize that that *is* the gift that Jesus said he would leave us. That realization *is* God's Holy Spirit. God is not who we think God is. Thank God! It is only *in* the Spirit we can even think about the Father and Son, and create a Trinity to explain it all.

God is stranger than we could ever imagine. God created it all, redeems it all, and lives in it all. God is simply and profoundly love itself, without beginning, without end, in an utterly simple Trinity of gift. It is so simple, it becomes impossibly complex to voice. Sort of like Mozart. Go ahead, try to

explain him. Sort of like a bud flowering—who knows how? Sort of like the warmth of a summer sunset or a baby’s smile. Explain those!

Friedrich Nietzsche once said: “I can only believe in a dancing God.”

As Sebastian Moore retorts: “No one ever told him about the Trinity, in which the persons only are in each other, so that all is movement, recalling another line of T.S. Eliot, ‘and there is only the dance.’”

When we fall out of the Spirit, out of the dance, it all seems so much more incomprehensible and impossible. “The risen Jesus *makes* us think of God differently” (Sebastian Moore), and only God’s Spirit can invite us into that freeing space. That *is* the dance of the Holy Spirit. That *is* the love God who so loves this world (John’s Gospel today) that he comes to dance himself.

Remember Sherlock Holmes. Once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth. So, gnaw on theology and doctrine all you want today, but save room for the dance. Dance a bit today in the beauty and music of a limitless love that could never just be one, but must be at least three, and at most, an invitation to a whole universe to hum and jig with delight. Through death itself, our God lives, and moves, and has breath in us. And in all God’s creation. *Gloria Patri.... Amen!*