

## **THREE PERSON GOD**

**MAY 18, 2008**

Today the Christian Church observes and celebrates the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The concept of the Holy Trinity is central to the Christian faith. Our belief in God in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit is at the core of what we believe.

There is a story told of Fountain Abbey in the north of England. Here medieval monks heard a sermon from their spiritual leader every Sunday of the year except one. On Trinity Sunday, there was no sermon delivered “owing to the difficulty of the subject” as the leader stated. In a sense, he was right in what he said.

For most of the year we preach on things we have learned from the life of Christ and those who came before and after him. We are speaking of people, actions, proclamations and events. But on this Sunday, we are speaking of a doctrine proclaimed by the church to explain the mystery of God in action in His world.

In speaking with many other ministers, they all speak of the difficulty of this subject. As a matter of faith it is not difficult, but the explaining of it is not as easy. A retired Anglican priest I know says he has been asked to preach Trinity Sunday the last four years in different congregations here and in Toronto because the minister or priest “needed to be away”. Pure coincidence we can say.

So, let us begin thinking about this great mystery by looking at some of the historical background which led to the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Let us begin by speaking of the Creeds of the church for they are essential in understanding the Trinity’s place in Christian belief.

As the Christian church spread throughout the Roman world in the first century, and as the first leaders died out, there was a practical need for local churches to have a basic statement of beliefs. As false teachers began to bring in strange ideas, Christians needed to know just what it was that we believe as followers of Christ.

The early Christians realized that new people didn’t have to know everything before they could be baptized and accepted as believers. The question was asked: how much should they know and accept before being admitted into the church? For this reason the early church wanted a brief statement of what they believed to be most essential for the followers of Christ. A creed would be a helpful reminder of the faith that was ours.

Churches in different regions of the Empire made their own lists of essential beliefs. As people moved from church to church, they shared these statements of faith between congregations; as a result of this sharing, there gradually evolved a common creed of faith.

One of these doctrinal lists of beliefs commonly used in the Western empire was called the Apostles’ Creed. The word creed comes from the Latin word credo, meaning “I

believe.” It was called the Apostles’ Creed not because the original apostles wrote it, but because the Creed was believed to be an accurate summary of what the apostles taught.

This Creed was useful in several ways:

1. The Creed was a public statement of faith, a standardized way in which new people could confess their faith in Jesus.
2. The Creed anchored Christian faith to a tradition, to make it difficult for people or churches to be led astray by strange doctrines.
3. The Creed was a preaching and teaching tool, giving an outline for further discipleship.
4. The Creed was memorized through frequent repetition, which helped the many believers who could not read.
5. The Creed provided a doctrinal basis for different churches to accept one another, and to reject those who did not agree to the basic truths.

We have evidence of the very early use of the Apostles’ Creed. For example, we have the writer Irenaeus in the year 200 describing a similar creed as did the great writer Polycarp, a follower of St. John around the same time. Tertullian, a brilliant church father and writer from North Africa speaks of this Creed in 220AD. So, this Creed gained acceptance very early within the church.

Let us review the Apostles’ Creed. Together, let us examine each line for their significance.

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
the Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:**

**Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.**

**He descended into hell**

**The third day He arose again from the dead.**

**He ascended into heaven  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,  
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting**

You will note that this wonderful creed does not define the Trinity clearly. It was then not yet an issue for theological dispute.

The earliest church did not honour the Trinity with any special feast day or special service. However, hymns going as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD spoke of the Trinity. Many of these were written to counter one of the earliest heresies in the church known as Arianism, a heresy named after a church leader named Arius. He denied the divinity of Christ. He said Christ was fully human but not divine. He felt that Jesus as Son of God stood midway between God and mankind but was not himself part of the Godhead.

In 325 AD as a result, church leaders from all over the Empire gathered in a town named Nicea. This early council, known as the Council of Nicea, reaffirmed the divinity of Christ while still affirming that Christ was also fully human. The Nicea Council affirmed a new creed which has been called ever since the Nicene Creed, the first great creed universally accepted within the Christian Church as fundamental belief.

Examine now the Nicene Creed. Note as we go through it that it is divided into three sections, one part each for God the Father, for God the Son and for God the Holy Spirit. The first line “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and all that is seen and unseen” ties our beliefs to the beliefs of the Hebrews who followed the one true God.

**We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.**

**And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.**

**And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

As we can see, this Creed tried to put into human words the great mystery of the Trinity. It was seen as a fundamental, defining belief of a Christian. God so loved the world as its creator, that He entered into history in the person of Jesus and imbued the world with His Spirit.

So what of creeds today? Each generation may well want to create a creed that speaks to their time. Many have been written with the essential elements intact. One of the finest from my point of view is the New Creed of the United Church of Canada formulated and set forth at the General Council of the United Church in 1968.

**We are not alone,  
we live in God's world.  
We believe in God:  
who has created and is creating,  
who has come in Jesus,  
the Word made flesh,  
to reconcile and make new,  
who works in us and others  
by the Spirit.**

**We trust in God.**

**We are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God's presence,  
to live with respect in Creation,  
to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope.  
In life, in death, in life beyond death,  
God is with us.  
We are not alone.  
Thanks be to God.**

In all of these creeds, we hear the faith of God's people being poured out in ways we can understand. They remind us of the richness of our faith and they clearly remind us of God's power and the mystery of what He has and continues to do for us.

The Trinity has tremendous impact on the lives of Christians, that the one God in whom we believe is not a God who lies hidden, but a God who can be seen and heard and touched in the person of Jesus: a God who pours himself out in love for us.

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit: In the name of this Trinity we go forward with courage and optimism into the world as His grateful people.

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