Explaining the Trinity?

...God’s love has been poured into our hearts... Romans 5.5

Last Sunday Karen announced that I was doing today’s sermon and promised that I was going to wrestle with the Trinity, like some sort of latter-day Jacob, I suppose, who after a worthy struggle will have the deity in a theological half-nelson and compel him to divulge the secret of the Trinity. But I am no wily Jacob. In fact the idea of “Trinity Sunday” sounds odd to me; will we have, say, “God Sunday” next week? Maybe, like a college having a “Day of Learning,” one wonders what they’re up to all those other days. Every Sunday is Trinity Sunday, or ought to be. But maybe the architects of the liturgical calendar were wise to push us toward explicit reflection on this central Christian confession, aware of our tendency to fall back into an implicit, bland, generic theism. So, here goes.

First, I should confess that I think the idea of the Trinity as an intellectual challenge threatening us with contradiction, absurdity, or sheer unintelligibility is overrated. The ancient doctrine—three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, each God, yet one God, not three Gods—is provably logically consistent. This, conjoined with the fact that the biblical witness—Jesus’ long soliloquy we hear a fragment of in this morning’s lesson from John’s gospel is an example—together with the experience of the Christian Church, affords us good reasons to believe that the
God who resurrected Jesus is a communion of distinct persons. This does not, of course, mean that the human mind has the capacity to grasp why this is God’s nature, but on the one hand there’s no reason to think we should be able to do so, and on the other there are any number of lesser instances—in the sciences and in mathematics, for example—where we have good reasons to believe that something is true, yet cannot understand why it is true, or even how it could be true. It’s not at all surprising that, if there is a God, then the nature of this ultimate reality eludes the grasp of primate brains crafted by natural selection for coping with the demands of life in the upper Pleistocene.

So, in a way, the formidable sounding challenge, “Explain the Trinity!” upon inspection tends to dissipate. However, while I think the intellectual challenge of the doctrine is exaggerated, I think that its practical importance is virtually impossible to overrate. The doctrine of the Trinity was worked out in the early Church not out of an urge to devise a new and improved conception of God, but to make sense of what was happening in the life of the Christian community. Lex orandi, lex credendi: the law of prayer is the law of belief. Christian doctrine arises out of the life of the Church; it’s not a product of theoretical speculation. The experience of the faithful was that God gave himself to us completely in Jesus, and that God, and Jesus, were fully, even if mysteriously, present in the work and witness of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, and the Spirit that came at Pentecost, could not be faithfully apprehended merely as representatives of God, but as God himself with us. Above all, they were realizing what it takes to begin to flesh out the fact that God is love. They saw that it’s not enough to say that God loves us, that loving us is one thing, among others, that God does, but that there might be other, countervailing considerations which push God’s love aside, things like a divine commitment to the ancient purity codes, or God’s regard for his glory, or for his holiness, or a need to satisfy the demands of justice. No: God is
love; this is God’s nature. God is no solitary being who might, or might not, choose to be in
generous fellowship with another. God is a communion of distinct persons eternally creating
unity out of difference. To be with, and for, the other is the very nature of God. As deep into
God as we might journey, as deep into reality as we might reach, it’s love we will find. The
Father, the Son, and the Spirit reaching out to one another in self-giving love, and God reaching
out in self-giving love to that which is not God, all the way down to the likes of us. The lover
will be with the beloved; he won’t send a surrogate. It is God himself who comes to us as Jesus.
It is God himself who comes to us as the Spirit. Nothing short of this is adequate to the new life
that breaks into the world in the community of Jesus’ followers. The radical meaning of the old
words from Proverbs, that wonderful text we heard this morning, came into focus. The praise of
God’s wisdom, and the tedious exhortations to the reader to calculate costs, to take care, to be
prudent, to seek God’s wisdom, abruptly breaks off with the exclamation of God’s no holds
barred, don’t count the consequences, don’t ask whether they’re worth it, love for humankind.
God delights in deploying his wisdom to create this world for us. God delights in us.

I’ll risk telling you what this reminds me of. When I was an undergraduate, late one Saturday
night I visited night court in lower Manhattan. There, all night long, cops brought in the
miscreants they collected off the streets. Prostitutes, muggers, drug dealers, the inebriated, and
assorted lunatics were brought before a clearly overworked, jaded, but no-nonsense judge to be
sorted out and sent off to their respective destinations: the precinct lock-up, the Tombs, Bellevue.
(This, or something like it, must have been the model for the charming TV show that ran in the
1980’s.) At one point, the bailiff calls a flashy, trashy blonde hooker to stand at the bench.
Seeing the judge, she exclaims, “Hi Robert! How’s it going?” and to all appearances delighted to
see her, his face lights up and with a big smile the judge says, “Sally! Good to see you! Where
have you been?” The dismal courtroom, the ornery cops and indifferent public defenders, the whole sad scene of human folly and failure, judgment and condemnation, falls away, and to all appearances they’re just old friends, happy to run into one another on a Saturday night. I don’t know what this implies about judicial proprieties in New York, but I’m counting on a divine judge who will be delighted to see each of us. Not because we are so lovable, but because he is love and committing to being fully there, with each of us, for each of us, no matter where we’ve ended up. This is what the Church tries to say in the doctrine of the God who is triune.

Our shared experience of the unconditional presence of the loving God leads us to believe, as the creed has it, in God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. Yet, as Hans, the character Christopher Walken plays in Seven Psychopaths points out, “God loves us, I know he does, he just has a funny way of showing it.” As I said, I don’t think we should find the idea of the Trinity any sort of embarrassment for Christian faith, but the fact that this God who allegedly loves us all so extravagantly lets such mayhem and misery befall us is a truly daunting problem. It’s one we cannot escape wrestling with, whether it’s close to home and personal—loved ones abruptly and senselessly killed on the interstate—or remote—on cable news we see the little bodies of schoolchildren retrieved from the wreckage a tornado leaves in its wake. To this God who is, we claim, love itself, we want to say, “Explain yourself!” seeking not an explanation of his nature, but some way to go on believing that he can be who Christian faith says he is. Some other kind of God, not the triune God who is love, but an all-too reasonable deity of human contrivance might plausibly be construed as sacrificing people for the sake of some greater good, but these maneuvers are not open to us.
The Christian faith’s first, and last, response to seemingly gratuitous evil is to point to Christ on the cross, confessing that there we see God with us and for us, suffering as one of us. God chooses not to prevent evil, but to be with us as we endure it. But we know how flat this can fall in face of real human tragedy. One need not be particularly obtuse to reply that while it’s very nice to think that when bad things happen, someone will be there with you, offering solace, but he’d much prefer someone who could, and would, keep the bad thing from happening in the first place. When your house is burning down while the firemen stand with you in the yard, offering comfort and consolation as you watch your doomed blazing cats fling themselves from the roof, when they could instead easily haul out the hoses and quench the flames, you will have reasonable doubts about your fire department’s competence or intentions.

I’d like to suggest that a robust Trinitarian confession can actually help us deal with the profoundly difficult problem of how a loving, all-powerful God can let this world’s horrors unfold unimpeded. The Trinitarian confesses that God became a human being. Those who saw Jesus saw the human face of God himself. What we consider much less often, especially in the Western in contrast to the Orthodox churches, is man becoming God. Two weeks ago we celebrated the Ascension. The resurrected Jesus leaves this world and returns to God the Father. Jesus ascends, but he does not abandon his humanity. He does not become a disembodied spirit. He was not a human being temporarily. The Second Person of the Trinity is forever a human being. Jesus Christ is God himself, and Jesus Christ is one of us, a human being. The Incarnation focuses attention on God becoming man. The Ascension focuses attention on man becoming God. To invoke the Athanasian Creed again:

Who although he be God and man, yet he is not two, but one Christ,
One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God.
The incarnate Christ is ascended, so humanity is now and forever irrevocably incorporated into God. God reaches out to his human creatures and, in Jesus, draws us into himself, to forever share his triune life. In creating this world which in due course gives rise to persons distinct from their creator, persons whose life God shares by becoming one of them, persons God calls to know and love him, God changes. In being himself to the fullest God becomes what is at first not God by any stretch of the imagination. God and his human creatures have become one. First Jesus, then by adoption those of us joined to him in faith, and finally that whole human race in which God delights. Perhaps we haven’t taken this with full seriousness. It might be that in binding himself to us he gives up certain kinds of power, not that there are things God lacks the wherewithal to do, evils God is powerless to prevent, but there are now things God can do only in conjunction with human beings. God’s union with humankind is not superficial; it might go so deep that omnipotence is now and forever constrained by human cooperation. When we ask why the all-powerful God doesn’t more efficiently and comprehensively defeat evil, for all I know the answer is in our indifference and faithlessness. Recall that Jesus, in whom God’s power over sin, suffering, and death was so clearly manifest, promised that when the Spirit came, we would do greater things. God makes us his co-workers, trusts us with his power and in so doing accepts the risk of our negligence, and worse. This is, of course, speculation, and even if it’s right, it’s at best just a part of a solution to the problem of evil.

In any case, our last word is God’s answer made flesh, the crucified Christ. The triune God overcomes cruel injustice by submitting himself to it. He overcomes suffering and death by dying, abandoned and cursed. God creates a world in which very bad things happen, yet promises its inhabitants that he loves them without end and then, to explain himself simply dies.
We should remind ourselves just how far from making sense this seems, how remote from all our plausible ideas of God. Hal Incandenza, protagonist of the great, late David Foster Wallace’s epoch novel, *Infinite Jest*, has a severely disabled but relentlessly cheerful brother, Mario, who frequently keeps him up at night asking him whether he believes in God. Finally, to shut him up, Hal says:

…tonight to shush you how about if I say I have administrative bones to pick with God...

I’ll say God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I’m not crazy about. I’m pretty much anti-death. God looks by all accounts to be pro-death. I’m not seeing how we can get together on this issue, he and I.

We naturally hope for a God wielding the power to make things right, and otherwise letting us remain our small and safe selves. What we get instead is the God who, as St. Paul reminds us, *pours* his love into us, offering himself to us without condition or moderation and taking us up into his life of incomprehensible risk and wonder.

*Amén.*