

Trinity Sunday

June 3, 2007

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On this first Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost we commemorate the full revelation of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This commemoration Christians call Trinity Sunday. Although the Trinity is found in Scripture, it is not specifically named as such in either the Old or New Testament. The Trinity is a doctrine of the church that expresses how the Church knows God through historical experience.

This morning Cullen is going to be baptized in the name of the Trinity. This formula for incorporating new Christians into the body of the church comes out of the historic revelation of God in whom we believe. Every Sunday morning we stand together and state what we believe in the words of the creed. As an evangelist I heard this week stated, "It does not matter what the preacher says, if what he says is right or wrong, because when he is done we'll stand together and state what we believe as we recite the creed."

The word creed comes from the Latin *credo* which is translated "I believe."

Belief is central to the Christian faith. There are many religions that put an emphasis on right practice or right behavior known as "orthopraxy." As Christians we stress what we believe known as "orthodoxy." What we believe was a natural development as the early Christian church begins to evolve and take on a particular identity.

In the Book of Deuteronomy you will find an ancient confession of belief known as the "Shema" from the first word "hear." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul and your might." This confession features three important elements. First, the call is communal in nature not personal - "Hear, O Israel." Second it states, God is one Lord and the only Lord to whom allegiance is owed. This was a very bold and important statement to make in a polytheistic world. Third the confession invites a personal commitment - you are to love the Lord your God with all of your being.

This is the origin of what was to develop in Christianity as a creed. The creed expresses the Christian story defining our allegiance to God who is known to us as the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer.

On Sundays in the context of Eucharist we use the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was issued by the Christian Church in 325 as an effort to state clearly the orthodox faith of the universal church. The Episcopal Church uses the Apostles' Creed at a baptism, considered to be the oldest of the Christian creeds. St. Ambrose used the title "Apostles Creed" to distinguish the baptismal creed of the church from other creeds being developed by the early church. There is no historical evidence to indicate the apostles had anything to do with the formation of this creed. The Apostles' Creed was preserved in question form which is how we will use the Apostles' Creed in our liturgy today. The questions, in the form of a Baptismal Covenant, were addressed to those about to be baptized. The responses are a statement of faith.

Turn to page 304 in your Prayer Book and you will find the Apostles' Creed at the beginning of the Baptismal Covenant. The Creed begins with the words, "I believe in....." "To believe" something is to accept that a theory, statement or idea is valid or true. But the creed couples the word "in" with the word "believe" implying much more than just, "I think this is true." To believe in something or someone is to hold that person or thing to be reliable and trustworthy. To believe in has to do with personal commitment. What originally brought Christians together was not a uniform set of beliefs but belief in Jesus. What held them together after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension was a presence they believed in, a Spirit among themselves which they believed was the same presence that was with them in Jesus. So, a statement was formulated that Christians could say together about what we "believe in."

The Creed begins with God. God is Father, the Creator, the One in whom all things begin. This is the God of the *Shema*, the one God to whom we owe allegiance. The creed states the one God is the Creator of heaven and earth. The implication is that the creation is good and the work of a single loving God. Therefore, all creation belongs to God. We human beings are to enjoy and respect the creation as stewards of that which God has freely given into our care.

The Creed goes on to state that we believe in Jesus Christ who is the only Son of God. The Catechism defines what we mean by the Son of God in this way, "Jesus is the only perfect image of the Father and shows us the nature of God which is love." Jesus' life reveals to us a loving, forgiving God who we can trust.

Luke Timothy Johnson in his book on the Creed states, "The heart of the Apostles' Creed can be found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians." Paul writes: "Christ died on behalf of our sins according to the Scriptures. And that he was buried.

And that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. And that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at the same time. Some from among them remain until now but some have died. And then he appeared to James and then to all the apostles. Last of all he appeared to me, as one born out of season." The Creed states that we believe that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. That he rose from the dead on the third day and ascended back to the presence of God from which he came. We believe that the time will come when Jesus will come again, as he promised, to bring all things to completion as God intended in the beginning when God created.

The creed then states we believe in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the link between the Church and the Risen Christ. Recall that Jesus told his apostles he would not leave them "comfortless." The Holy Spirit is not only a power that moves in us and through us but it is a continuation of the presence of God with us. In the power of the Holy Spirit we come to appreciate the communal nature of God who is revealed to us in three persons. As it has always been, the Holy Spirit serves as a symbol of God reaching humans whether in creating humans in God's own image, through the words spoken by the prophets, in Jesus, himself, or in movements of grace in the community of faith.

When it comes to the description of the church in the creed Luke Timothy Johnson writes, "We understand that faith is necessarily a matter of perceiving the unseen in what can be seen, that not everyone can see what we see, and even we at times, have difficulty seeing what we think we see." The creed speaks of the church as being holy, catholic and apostolic.

The idea of holiness is "being other than." God's command to Israel was "Be ye holy as I am holy." The church is called to be an entity that witnesses to the power and presence of God. Paul suggests that being holy means we, who are the church, are challenged to become all we might be. The church is called to speak the truth to the world and thus to be "other than" the world around us.

The church is catholic. The Greek word "catholic" means throughout the whole. As used in the creed the word "catholic" implies a universality and inclusiveness that embraces differences within a larger unity. The catholic church exists everywhere rather than in one place. The catholic church includes many forms and styles. The catholic church includes males and females, rich and poor, gay and straight, people of all colors, liberal and conservative. The ideal church embraces all in one unity of purpose which is to worship God and serve one another.

In the creed we confess unity with the communion of saints, all who have walked before us in faith. The path to Christian discipleship is a continual path of striving to be all that God created us to be. We believe as Paul writes, that nothing, including death, can separate us from God, so therefore at our baptism we become one with the communion of all who journey in faith.

The Creed goes on to link baptism to forgiveness of sin. The idea is to capture the reality of this life where we become separated from God and from each other. We learn the true nature of forgiveness from God who unconditionally forgives us over and over. Because God forgives us, we in turn are to forgive others and be reconciled one to another.

The "resurrection of the dead" and "life everlasting" are closely entwined with the notion of the world or age to come. From the start, Christianity has shared in the classical Jewish belief of a future life with God when all things are brought to completion. We live therefore in hope. Our hope is not off out there in the future but in the present moment. We believe, as baptized followers of Jesus, we have the power to be vehicles of God's love transforming the world in fellowship with the One who gives us the gift of life, who reveals to us the power of love in the life of Christ and who abides with us still in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen