

"A MOST CONFUSING DOCTRINE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 26, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

A recent issue of the Reader's Digest told of a woman who invited a young girl from India to go to church with her. It was the eleven year old's first exposure to Christian worship. Her parents were traveling on business and had left her with their American friends. This young girl with a Hindu background entered into the experience with enthusiasm. When they returned home, her American friends asked her what she thought of the service. The girl replied,

"I don't understand why the West Coast isn't included, too".

When they inquired what she meant, she said,

"You know...in the name of the Father, the Son and the whole East Coast".

DEVELOPMENT

I think we can understand her confusion for there are some parts of our faith that are difficult to understand or to explain. One of these is the Trinity. As we come together on this Trinity Sunday, I find myself in a difficult position. "On the horns of a dilemma" as they say.

On the one hand, I feel like the parents of another little girl must have felt. One day she asked her father, "Daddy, what is God like?" The question sounded innocent enough...until the father actually tried to put his answer into language that a five year-old could perhaps relate to. But finally, he gave the answer for which many fathers are famous, "Go and ask your mother."

So she went to her mother with the question, "Mother, what is God like?" The mother soon realized that she had no adequate answer for her daughter, either. She said, "Honey...why don't you ask your Sunday School teacher?" The little girl went to her Sunday School teacher with the same question, "What is God like?" The teacher said simply, "Why don't you ask your father or mother?" The little girl thought to herself as she left,

"If I had lived with God as long as my father and mother and Sunday School teacher, I think I would be able to tell a little girl what He is like."

That's one horn of the dilemma. We are Christians. We have walked with God, many of us, all of our lives. We ought to be able to tell people what God is like. However, there's another horn to this dilemma.

St. Augustine, one of the most astute thinkers the Christian Church has ever produced, was walking along the seashore one day while pondering this Doctrine of the Trinity - Father, Son and the "whole East coast". He seemed to hear a voice saying, "Pick up one of the large sea shells there by the shore". He picked it up. Then the voice said, "Now pour the ocean into the shell". And he said, "Lord....I can't do that". And the voice answered,

"Of course not. In the same way, how can your small, finite mind ever hold and understand the mystery of the eternal, infinite, triune God?"

Do you see the "drift" of my dilemma? Today many Christians will be celebrating this Doctrine of the Trinity. We do this on the Sunday after Pentecost. It is one of the most prized "truths" of our Christian Faith. "God in three persons - blessed Trinity..." How many times we've sung that. I'm glad were Trinitarians. I have a colleague who is a Unitarian minister, but he confessed to me once "I'm really a 'closet' Trinitarian!" If I had to explain the Trinity to a five year old, however, or even to a fifty year old for that matter, I'd be in a bit of trouble, too. For how can you pour the ocean into a mere seashell? How do you explain the grandeur of God to minds as limited as ours?

God in three persons. What does it mean? The word "Trinity" doesn't even appear in the New Testament. Why, then, did the Church Fathers formulate such a difficult and confusing Doctrine? It leads to all kinds of difficult questions. How could the "babe in the manger" control the movement of the stars above? Was Jesus merely quoting Psalms when He cried out, "My God...My God...why hast Thou forsaken Me?" These are questions for which I have no easy answers. Still, I want to affirm that this Doctrine of the Trinity is the very heart of everything we believe as followers of Jesus Christ.

GOD IS BEYOND THE CATEGORIES BY WHICH WE HUMANS CLASSIFY REALITY

It says to me, first of all, that God is beyond the categories by which we human classify reality.

J. B. Phillips, the British scholar, was right, "on target". Our God, he said, is too small. Look around you. Truly the heavens are telling the glory of God. And the glory which they describe is breath-taking.

One hundred and fifty years before Christ there lived a man by the name of Hipparchus who said there were exactly 1,026 stars in the universe. Fifteen hundred years later, Galileo - using the newly invented telescope - looked up into the sky and saw many times that number. And now we know that there are about 100 billion stars in our galaxy alone and there are billions of such galaxies besides ours. Can you deal with that? Billions and billions of solar systems like our own.

How big is this universe? It was February 23rd, 1987. An astronomer observed with his naked eye the explosion of a distant supernova - a blast so powerful that it released as much energy in one second as our sun will release in ten billion years. The truly startling fact is that this supernova exploded 170,000 years ago. It took that long for the light generated by that faraway event, traveling almost 6 trillion miles a year, to reach us.

We read about a comparable explosion last Fall. Except it may have taken two billion years for the light from that explosion to reach us, travelling almost 6 trillion miles per year. Can you imagine the magnitude of a God who is bigger than all that? Is your God big enough?

Can you imagine a God for whom time does not even exist? We talk about "forever". People sometimes say "Forever is a long time". That's not it at all. Where God is, there is no time. As Augustine taught us, God created time just as He created space. There is no tomorrow or yesterday in heaven. It is always now. It's hard for us to get our minds around that.

Eternity is timeless.

Out in Los Angeles there's a fossil museum beside the La Brea tar pits. At the entrance of the museum is a painting of a ribbon - 85 feet long - representing five billion years of the earth's history. One inch equals five million years. Guess how much space on that ribbon belongs to the history of the human race...from the cave man down to the astronauts? Less than one-half inch! As one author has asked, "What was God doing the other 84 feet, 11 and one half inches?"

Perhaps it's good for us to remember when we wonder why God doesn't keep our timetable that time is nothing to God. Time is a convenience by which we measure things - and not God. Many of us may have a God who is too small. We want to create God in our image, but He is the "Divine Other". He is beyond our imagining. When we say "God in three persons", we are affirming that God is beyond the categories by which we humans classify reality.

GOD VISITED THIS PLANET IN THE PERSON OF JESUS

Moving on...at the same time, we are affirming that

the God who is beyond our understanding visited this planet in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

I know I am going beyond what many people can accept, but this is the heart of the Christian message. We are not Deists. We do not believe that God set the world in motion and then walked off and left it - like a huge clock - to tick off smoothly, regularly. We believe that God visited our world in the life of a humble Jewish carpenter.

Note that I did not say in the "guise" of a humble carpenter. I said in the life of this carpenter. Jesus was not God masquerading as a man. No, God emptied Himself and became fully human when Christ was born in the manger of Bethlehem. He cried real tears and sweat real sweat and bled real blood. He was a real man, and yet God was in Him, as Paul liked to put it, "reconciling the world unto Himself".

Thus, our Jesus was more than just another hero. Heroes come and go. Want to hear an absurd statistic? There was a poll recently that caught my attention. It was by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Tennessee, surveying some one thousand people concerning how they felt about the deceased, rock-and-roll star, Elvis Presley. It found the following startling results:

"27% of those interviewed believe Elvis never disobeyed his parents. 7% believe he never told a lie".

Amazing!

Jesus was more than just another hero, more than another great teacher, more than a dedicated martyr. He was all these things, of course, but more. He was God emptying Himself and taking on Himself the sufferings of us all. Can you deal with that? I'm sure you can.

There's an old story about former Notre Dame football coach, Knute Rockne. Rockne once devised a play where both guard and center pull to go block for the ball carrier. Obviously that left a large hole in the center of the offensive line. It was the quarterback's job to hit all the big linemen who poured through the hole that was opened up.

Rockne was once explaining the play to a fellow coach when the coach interrupted Rockne's explanation to inquire how effective the play had been. Rockne then admitted he didn't really know in that his quarterback had never been stupid enough to call the play.

It's beyond our comprehension that the God of billions of galaxies would humble Himself to become one of us and take upon Himself the weaknesses and our shame - but you see - GOD IS GOD. He defies all the categories with which we are familiar. And that is what the doctrine of the Trinity is saying to us. God is bigger than all our categories. Yet God humbled Himself and walked among us.

THIS SAME GOD IS AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE OF US

And finally, this same God who creates and sustains, and who in Christ suffered and died, is available to everyone of us - here and now.

Wow! That is what we mean by the work of the Holy Spirit. God is present. He is available. He is our Comforter, our Sustainer, our Friend. Yes, as it says in the Korean Creed which we use from time to time in our service:

"We believe in the Holy Spirit,
God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and
for strength."

There's an old story of a conversation between former Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, of Israel and President Jimmy Carter. It was during one of Begin's visits to America. Begin questioned Carter about his platinum, red and gold telephones in the Oval Office. "Tell me, what are they really for?" he kidded the President.

"Well, the platinum phone goes to Plains, Georgia, so I can keep track of Billy, my brother. The red phone is a hot line to Russia so I can keep track of what's happening there. My gold phone is a direct line to God".

"How much does it cost to call God"? Begin asked. "Ten thousand dollars" Carter replied, "But it's worth every penny!"

Later when Carter was visiting Begin in Israel, he asked the same question, "What are your three phones for?" Begin replied,

"One's a hot line to Egypt...another's a hot line to Parliament...to keep me informed, and the third is a hotline to God".

"How much does it cost to call God from here?" Carter asked. Begin replied, "Ten cents...you see, Jimmy, it's a local call".

CLOSING IT UP

This difficult doctrine of the Trinity says to us that the same God of a billion galaxies, and who emptied Himself and walked the hot and dusty roads of Galilee is a local call. He is here and He is available.

If we have a need, He is our Provider. If we are heart-broken, He is our encourager. If we have wandered far from the path of righteousness, He is our Saviour. Everything we ever need, we find in Him. God - in three persons - Blessed Trinity.

PRAYER

ETERNAL SPIRIT...Father of our spirits and the Father of all mankind. We have come to Your house this day from different backgrounds and for different purposes.

SOME OF US are here because we're feeling the pressure and stress of life in the city...crowding in on us...and we have come to know from past experience that we cannot always handle the "bumps and bruises" of life entirely on our own...that things seem to go so much better for us when we slow down, think of You, and pause to see life from the "higher ground" of worship.

SOME OF US are here because we're lonely. We walk the crowded streets of this city...people pass us by...no one seems to notice...to care. We have "low" moments when we feel that no one loves us, but then deep in our hearts we feel that tug from You that reminds us that You care, that You love us, that our lives are precious in Your sight.

OTHERS OF US are here because at other times and in other places we have felt close to You...we have had a "mountain top" experience, a fleeting glimpse, an inner vision of what life could be if only all people took You seriously and lived by the Words You have given us in the Bible.

AND SO WE ARE HERE....anxious, but uncertain...seeking always to hear Your voice and to put our convictions into action.

LORD, GOD, whatever the reason may be that has brought us here this day, may each of us feel and experience something that will work a miracle in our lives, something that will permit Your peace and power to flow through us into the lives of others.

Help us to slow down that our "restless spirits" may grow quiet and serene as we feel the gentle invasion of Your love.

MAY WE DEPART from this sanctuary of worship spiritually refreshed - with renewed insight, a better perspective, with courage and also with compassion, with faith and also with trust to do battle with the stress and struggles of another week in this city.

May we carry away from here something of Your love for all mankind, and help us to share that love with others - the hurt, homeless, and hungry - the tempted and the troubled - the sick and discouraged and the dying.

All of this we ask in the strong name and the loving spirit of Christ, our Lord.

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PRAYER Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, that we may perceive the vast mysteries of Your abiding truth. Keep us simple as we try to work out our own way of life, and yet grant that we do not miss the "deeps" of life.

Help us always to remember that Your goodness and Your power and Your presence with us are always one and the same....and that You art three persons, ever inseparably united in One majestic, transcendent God. In Your name we now pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: May 26, 1991

ETERNAL SPIRIT...Father of our spirits and the Father of all mankind. We have come to Your house this day from different backgrounds and for different purposes.

SOME OF US are here because we're feeling the pressure and stress of life in the city...crowding in on us...and we have come to know from past experience that we cannot always handle the "bumps and bruises" of life entirely on our own...that things seem to go so much better for us when we slow down, think of You, and pause to see life from the "higher ground" of worship.

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All of this we ask in the strong name and the loving spirit of Christ, our Lord.

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer,
believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched :
Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall
strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of
the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good
with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.
They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run
and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that who-
soever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting
life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:
who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy
disease".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on
Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News:
We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for
others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with
healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| 1. <u>Karen Oldham</u> | 2. <u>Bobbie Heron</u> | 3. <u>Nellie Denloye - going to hos.</u>
Sioane Kettering |
| 4. <u>Doris Moore, mother</u>
of John | 5. <u>Daisy Herrick</u> | 6. <u>Ada Kinney</u> |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and
the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to _____ who in recent
days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of
us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our
hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray....
For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught
us to say when we pray..

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy
Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in
heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not
into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the
Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, May 26, 1991

I. A ROSE ON THE ALTAR

- A. Please note the rose on the altar...it's there in love and in honor of Joseph Michael DeGennaro, infant son of Toni DiGennaro, born Saturday night, May the 18th...at St. Vincent's Hospital.

II. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of warm welcome to the visitors who have joined us here this morning in worship. We hope that we shall have opportunity to greet you in a more personal way....do be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card. Or sign one of the Guest Books...
- B. Come, worship with us...work with us, too, in the outreach concerns of our parish. The Saturday Feeding program continues during the summer months...volunteers are needed.
- C. Doing the Lord's work here since 1837...roots are deep in the soil of this city. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet you on this May Sunday morning. Members: wear your name tags...and be sure to make two new friends downstairs at the coffee hour.

III. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are before you in the bulletin. Review those announcements on your own...coming to a slower and quieter time of the church year...but still certain programs continue across the weeks ahead: "Hounds" on Tuesday evening. Aldersgate Class on Wednesday evening.
- B. Be sure to sign up for the outing to Shea Stadium to see the Mets play on Monday evening, June 17th and remember the June 22nd All Church Picnic...for which tickets will go on sale in early June.
- C. Today's the final Sunday to make a special gift to the May appeal known as the Golden Cross Offering - for the Homes and Health Care Agencies of our Conference. Another fifty dollars will put us over the top of our budgeted goal of \$300. Hopefully, 10 \$5.00 bills will appear in those envelopes in the pews...or 5 \$10 bills...or 50 1 dollar bills.
- D. Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.