

"WHAT ON EARTH IS THE HOLY TRINITY?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 10, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

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And he is not alone. It was George Bernard Shaw who once said that all professions of our belief are conspiracies against the laity. And nowhere else does this seem to be more true than in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

STILL, CHRISTIANS ARE TRINITARIANS

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"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit",

With these familiar words, Christians baptize their children, marry their spouses, bury their dead, and celebrate their sacraments. The words are a part of the worship and the ritual of every Christian body on earth. Everywhere you go in the world, you will find Christians using the same language about God. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". Just what do these words mean? Are they just some sort of "mumbo-jumbo" designed to confuse the laity, or do they point to something real and important? For most of us they are a means of dealing with the nature of God.

According to most polls, ninety-eight percent of the American people say they believe in God. That can mean everything or that can mean nothing. For many people, that belief is a vague notion about "Someone in the great Somewhere" (to quote a popular religious song of some years ago). For a lot of people God is nothing more than a vast oblong blur. C. S. Lewis once wrote of a girl he knew who said that the word "God" reminded her of a "vast tapioca pudding". The only problem was that she hated tapioca pudding!

It makes a tremendous difference what sort of God we believe in. In these days when religious fanatics threaten the world, we have come to realize, if we didn't know it before, that belief in God is not nearly enough. The question is: what sort of God do we believe in? Do we believe in a God who condones the taking of hostages, the murder of innocent people, the tyranny and the oppression of millions?

Christians believe in a God who has revealed His nature and purpose to the world in and through Jesus Christ. We also believe that God continues to reveal Himself, continues to act on the stage of human history. When Jesus was no longer with the disciples, they did not feel that God had left them. And, at Pentecost, the presence of God became richer and deeper than ever before as the Holy Spirit came upon them. This God who continues to reveal Himself in the world and in the hearts of people, Christians call "Holy Spirit".

Very early on in the life of the Christian Church it was found necessary to speak of God in these three ways: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Around the year 55 A. D., St. Paul wrote two letters to the Church at Corinth. And in the second letter Paul wrote,

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!"

(II Corinthians 13:14)

I imagine that Paul would have been surprised if someone had told him that those words would become an official blessing or benediction used universally by the Christian Church for the next two thousand years! But those words sum of the essence of the Christian Faith. We believe that because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we have come to know the love of God, in and through the fellowship (the community) of the Holy Spirit, which is the Church. And so many a Sunday across the year we come in here singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy...Lord God Almighty...God in three persons, blessed Trinity!"

DOES THIS MEAN WE BELIEVE IN THREE GODS?

Does this mean that we believe in three Gods? Emphatically and absolutely not! In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity was set forth in an effort to preserve the oneness of God. It was not developed by theologians living aloof from the world in some ivory tower, but it came out of the day-to-day experience of those first Christians.

As good Jews, they believed in One God. But they had experienced the presence of God visiting them in the person of Jesus, who is called the Christ, "God's anointed One" (the "revealer" of God). And when Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh, they did not feel that God had left them. Indeed, Jesus told them,

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Of course, the Trinity is a deep mystery. Theologians have spent lifetimes spraining their brains trying to understand it.

It helps to remember what the early Church meant when it spoke of "God in three persons". The word "person" comes from the Latin "persona", and originally referred to the mask worn on the stage by actors in a play. Because of masks, actors in the Roman theater could play several different roles. So God plays different roles on the stage of human history. God is Creator, God is Redeemer, God is Sustainer. We might say that the doctrine of the Trinity describes God's

progressive efforts to get closer and closer to us. Not content to be "above" us, God came to walk beside us. Not even content with that, God now dwells within us. That is what we mean when we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit". The Holy Spirit, as Yale Divinity School Professor Halford Luccock used to say, is "God in the present tense".

WHAT DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT DO?

What does the Holy Spirit do? That is a question that makes this doctrine relevant to your life and mine. The Holy Spirit makes God real in our lives today.

The Revised Standard version of the Bible translates Jesus' title for the Holy Spirit as "counselor". That seems to me to be a rather weak translation of the Greek word "parakletos". You may have heard preachers use the English form of the word, "paraclete". (Not parakeet! There's that "honorable bird" again!). A "parakletos" was someone found in ancient courts of justice, a legal assistant, a counsel for the defense, an advocate, one who pleads the cause of another. It also was the Greek word for one who runs alongside a fainting soldier and cheers him on. We could all use a bit of cheering on from time to time. That's what the Holy Spirit is supposed to do. The Holy Spirit is the "Cheerleader!"

The King James Version calls the Holy Spirit the "comforter". There's an old story of a seminary student in Edinburgh who had a typographical error on a term paper. He was trying to say that "The Lord has taken away our guilt". But the sentence came out, "The Lord has taken away our quilt". To which the professor penned in the margin,

"That's alright. He has promised to send us the Comforter!"

"The Comforter". That's not a bad word, for it comes from two Latin words which mean "One who stands beside us to give us strength" Again, who is to doubt that the Church and all of us who are within the Church, could use an extra portion of spiritual strength?

One of the nicknames given to the early Methodist was "The Enthusiasts". It was not intended to be a compliment. They were looked upon as being weirdos. Imagine, people who sought to live their lives completely under the direction of the Holy Spirit! But the word "enthusiasm" comes from two Greek words "en theos" meaning in God. What would our lives look like if they were lived "en theos", "in God?" I daresay there would be more joy and power to them!

The Church is supposed to be "the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit". Someone once suggested that around any given church there might be drawn three circles: first, an outer circle; second, a middle one; and third, an inner one.

In the outer circle are those to whom religion is little more than a routine. It is more of a burden than it is a blessing. They carry it; it does not carry them. As Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "Some people have just enough religion to make themselves miserable". I've seen people like that. They attend church occasionally; they drop in a few dollars in the offering plate once in a while. They call on the church for weddings, funerals and baptisms. But they are living in the edge of the Christian life. Tragically, this group is very large.

A pastor was typing the creed and instead of typing, "I believe in the Holy Spirit" he inadvertently omitted a vowel and typed, "I believe in the Holy Spirt" Let's face it, for a lot of people, religion is a matter of "Holy Spurts". There is a burst of activity at Christmas and Easter, but little in between. These are the folks in the outer circle.

In the Middle Circle are those who have had some sort of religious experience somewhere along the line. They attend church fairly regularly and contributed fairly well. They are essentially good people. But their religion has little joy and power in it. They go through the motions, but there is something missing. They have a deep longing for something more, something deeper. They have a hunch that they are missing something, but they don't know just what it is or where to get it. Again, their group is very large. Not as large as the first circle but large.

Then there is the third group - the Inner Circle. And these are the people - and every congregation is blessed with some of them - for whom religion is a reality and not merely a ritual. They are in touch with the deep resources of the Christian Faith. They know what it is to have a personal relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Now that term, "Inner Circle", has a bit of a "snobbishness" about it, doesn't it? It sounds rather elitist, but it isn't - not at all. The God proclaimed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ stands with outstretched arms to welcome everyone in. If anyone is outside this inner circle of God's love, it is because of their own choosing.

CLOSING Back in the 16th Century there was an Italian nobleman named Lorenzo de Medici who lived in Florence and who took great pride in staging pageants...especially religious pageants.

One day he really outdid himself. He was staging a re-creation of the Pentecost story in one of the churches in Florence and attempted to reproduce it, exactly in every respect, including the "tongues of fire" which the Book of Acts says came to rest on the heads of the disciples at Pentecost. Unfortunately, the fire got out of hand and burned the costumes, set fire to the draperies, and eventually burned down the whole Church.

Perhaps there's a parable for us here. What would happen if we could get some of the spiritual fire which empowered those first Christians at Pentecost? Perhaps it would not burn down the church, but burn out of the church all of the laziness and pettiness and selfishness and half-heartedness, luke warmness and give the world a sample of what a spirit-filled people really looks like: a people filled with "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control". A people of God's purpose living and working in the world.

As a philosopher once said,

"One day after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity...after all the scientific and technological achievements, we shall harness for God the energies of love...and then for the second time in history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

"Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, that we may perceive the mysteries of Your 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 to remember, always, that thy goodness and power and presence with us are always one and the same; that You are three persons...ever inseparably united in one majestic, transcendent and loving God.

Amen".

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PRAYER Let us bow our heads and pray together.