

Trinity Sunday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
15 June 2025

John 16:12-15

There was a priest, a young boy, a scientist, and a pilot in a plane flying at high altitudes. Suddenly, the pilot opened the cabin door and announced, "I am so sorry, there is something terribly wrong with this plane and we will crash soon, and I am afraid there are only three parachutes." After saying this he grabbed one of the parachutes and jumped. The scientist said, "I have been the wisest man of my generation. I have produced many wonderful discoveries, and this world still needs me!" He then grabbed another parachute and jumped. The priest told the young boy, "Son, I have lived a long life, I have served the Lord and my community with integrity and love. You take the parachute. I know where I am going, and I am not afraid". The boy replied, "Don't worry father, we still have two parachutes. The scientist took my backpack!"

All knowledge is partial and limited. We look at an object from a particular perspective and come to believe that our view truly represents the object. A different person in the same room looks at the same object and gets an entirely different understanding of it. Yet one more person may look at the object from another point of view and believe something totally different. It is the same with people. We may spend an entire lifetime with a person and still know very little about them. We don't have access to much of what people feel or think, to their fears, their secret ambitions and passions, their internal insecurities, and their anxieties. We remain a mystery to each other, and this makes humans very interesting. We surprise each other every day with great acts of compassion. We surprise each other with our creativity, our resilience, and our endurance. Fr. Steve and I have seen this firsthand in the Dominican Republic this last week.

Sadly, we also surprise each other with our acts of thoughtlessness and insensitivity. We see every day unthinkable acts of inhumanity. Humans are complex and a mystery that can only be comprehended partially on this world. The truth of who we are still awaits to be revealed. After three years together, Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of John, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Even after all this time traveling, preaching, talking, sharing meals, and praying to the Father together, Jesus remains a mystery to his disciples. There are truths about him and about God that we cannot bear, we cannot understand. This statement from Jesus has proven to be true in every generation of the Christian Church.

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Holy Trinity. Although there is plenty of Biblical evidence for the idea that God is three persons in one, the Bible never mentions the word “Trinity.” The Trinity is one of those ideas Jesus did not say much about, perhaps because people of his day could not bear such an idea. Jesus says, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” The Holy Spirit will reveal a deeper understanding of God to the community as this Spirit leads the community into all truth. The Spirit will show the way forward and will declare all things as the Church is able to bear them.

This is exactly what happened with the thinking around the Holy Trinity. The early believers began to see in Holy Scripture that God seems to behave in various distinct ways when relating to his creation. Sometimes he relates as Almighty Creator, Father of the nation and of Jesus, Liberator, Merciful Judge, Defender of his people, etc. In Jesus, God relates to his people as human-divine Messiah, Redeemer, Rescuer, and Servant. In His Holy Spirit God relates to his creation as Personal Revealer who reveals God to us, and helps us to understand who Christ is, as Sanctifier who sets-aside believers for the service of God, as Guide who leads believers into all truth, as Proclaimer who bears testimony about Christ and glorifies him, and as Life-Force of the new community, who always sends us into the world to proclaim God’s love and God’s forgiveness for humanity in his Son, Jesus.

When this community of faith began to identify these distinct roles of God, they began to think of these roles as persons. They saw three distinct persons in God, even though they knew that God was one, indivisible reality. Little by little this faith of the Christian community was taken on by the theologians who began to think and write about this deeper way of understanding God. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, exhorted obedience to “Christ, and to the Father, and to the Spirit” in a sermon written around 110 C.E. Origen ended some of his writings in the early Second Century, “In the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.” Then, towards the end of the Second century, Theophilus of Antioch used the word “Trinity” for the first time. What developed after this was a number of heresies about the Trinity. Some believed that there were three different gods sharing space, some believed that Jesus was “adopted” as God at his baptism, but was not originally God. Some believed that the Holy Spirit was a separate God from the Father/Son Godhead. This went on for almost two centuries, until the first defense of the doctrine of the Trinity by Tertullian in the Third Century. His understanding of God in three persons, equal in substance, and co-eternal, was finally approved by the Nicene Fathers in their famous creed we pray every week.

We may say that in the case of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, The Holy Spirit led us into deeper truth through the work of a committee or Church council. There may be some value in church committees after all. What is important for us to remember today is that we only see the beginning of any of God's works. We cannot fully understand the nature and the end of creation. We are surrounded by ambiguity and mystery. I can no more fully understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity today than the authors of the Nicene Creed could in their day. We see plenty of evidence in Holy Scripture that God acts in various ways through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but we don't know much about the mysterious unity and diversity within the Trinity. For now, we must accept to live with this ambiguity, and we must be comfortable with this mystery, knowing that one day, the Spirit of God will reveal all truth, and we will see God face to face in God's full glory.

Many non-Christians appeal to reason and to certainty as the measure of all belief systems. Some of them say, "Prove to me that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and I will believe in God." My friends, to demand proof before accepting the faith is like saying, "Prove to me you know your wife 100% in her thoughts, emotions, dreams and aspirations, and then I will believe you really have a wife." This is virtually impossible. There is no way to prove scientifically the existence of God. Our knowledge is limited and our ability to comprehend is affected by our own human imperfections. Paul used to say that we look at reality as through a dark glass dimly. Faith is a choice we make. We accept that there is mystery in the world and that there is much we don't know about God, others, and even ourselves. And still, in spite of this mystery, we choose to accept there is someone greater than ourselves who holds our future in his loving hands. We choose to accept our limitations, knowing fully well that one day we will know fully, even as we are fully known by him.

For now, let us be content with the knowledge that the same God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit loves us greatly. We are dear in God's eyes, and God will go through any extent to redeem us and to rescue us. Love is at the very heart of the Trinity. We may not understand much about how the Holy Trinity operates, but we know that God loves us and is willing to die for us. We know that He seeks a relationship with us. And we know that He sends his Holy Spirit to us every day to lead us the rest of the way. The rest is mystery! For now, we only see the beginning of God's work. We pray today that God's Holy Spirit will one day allow us to see God as God is. Until then, may God give us the strength to be at peace even in the mist of ambiguity and mystery. Amen!