

More than words

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016.

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? Proverbs 8:1

The Book of Proverbs describes Wisdom as the driving force behind all creation. She worked along side of the Creator, taking delight in every part of the Creation. She raised her voice and the creative action of God began. She was there in the creation of the heights of the mountains and depths of the valleys that formed the land and seas, marking out the foundations of the earth. She delighted in the creation of the human race to inhabit the earth.

On this Trinity Sunday, we rejoice in how the one God is experienced in three most significant ways as Father and Creator, as Son and Redeemer and as Holy Spirit and Sanctifier. God is experienced in as many ways as there are people. There is no limit to the ways in which we experience God's presence in everyday life.

The three-fold nature of God was not articulated until long after the time of Christ. More than a teaching, more than a doctrine, the Trinity is better experienced than explained. The most succinct statement of the three-fold nature of God is found in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. If you have difficulty understanding and accepting parts of those Creeds you are not alone. Doubt and faith go hand in hand in contemplating the meaning of the one God revealed in three distinct ways. It must be remembered that while some of the points in the Creeds are historical, others are metaphorical and not intended to be taken literally.

Differences in views on the nature of God reach back to the early church in the first centuries. The Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles themselves, but reflects what was believed at the time of the apostles. The early church saw major heresies regarding the nature of God that included Gnosticism and Nestorianism all of which denied that the three persons of the Trinity were co-equal. By the early fourth century, Arius, a priest from the city of Alexandria believed that Jesus was not God incarnate. To settle the controversy, the Emperor Constantine convened a Council of the church in 325 A.D. in the city of Nicea. What developed from that Council became what we know as the Nicene Creed. It affirms our belief in the ongoing three-fold nature of God in equal importance in creation, redemption and source of inspiration. What we say in the creed is not just words, but a statement of conviction that God's wisdom continues to be involved in the ongoing process of creation and re-creation.

In our finite attempts to comprehend the infinite, we still only have a partial understanding of the full nature of God. We ascribe our finite human characteristics to the infinite God by using terms such as the face, heart, hands, mind, voice, and arms of God, even though we know that God is above and beyond human description. Throughout the history of humanity we have relied upon linguistics to describe our understanding of the nature of God.

God is known in ancient Hebrew Scripture by various names such as ELOHIM that describes the creative and omnipotent nature and plurality of God's personality. JEHOVAH or YAHWEH refer to God's eternal nature. ADONAI refers to God's dominion over all. ABBA is the most informal and personal reference to God as Father, roughly translated into a colloquial expression of 'Daddy.'

Pantokrator is the ancient Greek expression for God as the creator of the universe. Paraclete expresses God's Spirit who is our source, guide, and advocate who connects humanity with all that is holy. The surest way that we can be brought into a closer understanding of the full nature of God is to know the person of Christ Jesus who is fully God and fully human.

The infinite God can never be fully understood by our finite minds. The best we can do is to try to understand that God is neither bound by our limitations of time and space nor by human characteristics. Each of us comes to our personal understanding of the Deity through our own experience. I can tell you what I believe from my own experience while your understanding is from your own experience. In the final analysis our understanding of God is still only partial.

Being made in the image of God doesn't mean that God looks like us or that we look like God, but that we are made in the way God intends for us to be. When the theologian Paul Tillich referred to God as "the ground of all being" it was an attempt at describing how God is over us, with us, in us, for us and among us.

An all too simplistic analogy to explain the Trinity is how we are a son or daughter to our parents, a brother or sister to our siblings, a spouse to our life partner, a father or mother to our children and an uncle or aunt to a nephew and niece. The three persons of the one God are still one and same known in essentially different ways. Efforts at trying to understand the nature of God lead us to perceive God in a myriad of ways. I think of God as majestic and powerful and at the same time is close, loving and caring. The more we come to know the person of Christ through his life and teachings the better we can know and experience the full nature of God.

The most important three-dimensional relationship is our relationship with each other in Christ. With Christ at the center of all our relationships we are assured of the bond that is authentic, honest and upheld by love and respect for each other. With Christ at the center of their relationship, spouses and partners are bound together in a trusting relationship that gives them a perspective that binds them together.

Many great volumes have been written regarding our search for knowing the full nature of God. Edwin Markham's Quatrains states his belief in God in a most basic way:

Here is the Truth in a little creed,
Enough for all the roads we go:
In love is all the law we need,
In Christ is all the God we know.