

HOMILY FOR SUNDAY, MAY 10TH, 2026

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John 14: 15 – 21

What I want to say to you is inspired by our reading this morning from the 14th chapter of John. Before I truly begin, let me say that I am about to do something that is either terribly brave or barking mad. I am going to speak about Trinitarian Theology – a subject that divided the church for much of its early centuries and even today causes divisions about which we should mostly be ashamed. It is also a doctrine that many find difficult to understand. Notwithstanding the difficulties, it is an essential underpinning of our faith. So wish me luck!

Chapters 13 through 17 of John are what are routinely described as the farewell discourses. Jesus' earthly ministry is moving to its end. Even chapter 12 concludes with: *Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.* Clearly Jesus is acknowledging the Father who sent him.

In Chapter 13 we have the Johannine version of the last supper although unlike the Synoptic Gospels there is no reference to the Holy Meal. Instead the emphasis is on Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Like the other Gospels, Jesus predicts his betrayal and foretells Peter's denial. Chapter 14 begins with Jesus assuring the disciples with, *Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you.* Again we have a strong affirmation of the Father.

Jesus promises: *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

In Biblical Greek the word translated in the NRSV as "advocate" is *paraklētos*, which literally translated means "one called along side" to provide aid, defence, or counsel and thus we have the Holy Spirit defined.

As I began this homily, I said that I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Of

course the three trip off the tongue easily. You hear it regularly, but you may not appreciate the several centuries of debate, dispute, and even war that preceded it becoming generally understood in the Christian Church as the nature of God. To paraphrase the Nicene Creed The Father begets the Son with whom he is of one being and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are worshipped and glorified. The Trinity expresses what God is, God's one nature, and who God is, Father, Son, Holy Spirit – one nature or essence, three persons, one God.

Part of the difficulty in understanding One God with three persons is the word person. Do not forget that the church fathers in the 4th century were working in Latin. Person comes from the Latin word persona which originally referred to a mask worn by an actor in a theatrical production to allow that actor to present differing aspects of character. We still use the exact Latin word persona to signify how people present themselves in different circumstances. We remain the same human, but we present differently depending upon the role we are playing. Maybe we would find it

easier if we said God presents God's self as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For God is everything about those three and so much more. For all its challenges, the doctrine of the Trinity is the best human attempt so far to understand, however, imperfectly the Living God whom we cannot fully understand and most assuredly cannot contain.

Most of us are old enough to remember when we read and spoke of the Holy Ghost, certainly in the Book of Common Prayer. At the time of the writing of the first Prayer Book in English in 1549 and when the King James Edition of the Bible was published in 1612, derived from the German word *Geist* which also translates to Spirit, ghost was understood to be the spirit or the essence of a person. Over the last 500 years, the word "ghost" has come to mean the appearance of someone already dead, or something spooky, a creature of Halloween. Frankly I think Casper the Friendly Ghost Cartoon sunk the Holy Ghost in favour of the Holy Spirit. Despite the name change, there is no change in the way the Spirit is understood as one of three persons of the one God.

You may also be aware of a change in the creed between the BCP and the BAS. In the BCP when the creed refers to the Holy Ghost it says proceeds from the Father and the Son. The BAS says proceeds from the Father only. “And the Son” is known as the *filioque* clause in Latin which is how it is referenced. It is a Western Church addition more than a century after the original Creed was developed in an attempt to counter Arianism – a heresy that claimed Jesus was not divine. The Orthodox Church and Eastern Catholic Churches have never used it. Over the last fifty or more years it has been increasingly dropped from worship in western churches.

The drop is to be celebrated because it makes the concept of the Trinity clearer. There is the Father who begets the Son and the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and is the person of God with us always in a truly immediate way as Jesus promised in our passage this morning.

The best way I can think of to express who is the Spirit is to ask you to think of the voice that comes to you unexpectedly and brings you comfort, direction,

responsibility, consolation, and drive. That voice often drives you in a way you don't want to go, or at least never imagined going. It is a voice that you need to be open to hear. But it is a voice that does not give up.

Another way I can think of it is as follows: I am shortly to turn 73, so I have already lost lots of people who mattered to me profoundly. But the older I get, I find that once I get over the initial grief at the loss, they are not so far away. Even as time passes, they become closer as who they are to me becomes more powerful than my sense of loss. They still matter enormously and still give direction and meaning to my life. Perhaps the extreme example is the woman, the closest I have ever had to a real grandmother, although we share no genetic connection. She died on August 14th, 1977, when she was 85 and I was just past 24. I doubt that a week goes by that I don't think of her. The grief is long gone, but the thanksgiving for who she was to me grows with every time she comes to mind. If that immediacy can be true for a fellow mortal how many more times true it can be of the Spirit who proceeds from the Father.

Every time we hear “God be with you”, and we reply “And also with you” we are invoking that person of the one God known as the Holy Spirit.

So in chapters 12, 13, and 14, John lays the foundation for Christians of Trinitarian Theology – a theology which in no way contradicts the assertion that there is one God. That God can be approached by humanity; but ,cannot be limited by his human creation.

Many in those early years, and most certainly the Jews of the Synagogue, saw the Doctrine of the Trinity as an affront to monotheism: there is One God. But the notion of the three persons in One God is not as foreign to Hebrew Scripture as one might suppose. For example, in Genesis 1:26: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...'" . In Genesis there are three sources combined into one book. The Yahwist source, the Elohist source, and the Priestly Source. In scholarly writing there are commonly referred to as J, E, and P. In E, God is named as Elohim which is a plural form of a name in ancient Hebrew. There are examples of the use of Elohim, the plural name of God in Genesis, Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms,

and Joshua. Difference in the sources should not be regarded as definitive. Every line of scripture, divinely inspired as it might be, represents a struggling humanity attempting to understand its Creator.

It is 13.8 billion years since the inception of creation in the big bang. In all that time, humankind has, sometimes nobly, and sometimes vilely, attempted to understand the Creator and Creation. Nobly when we have humbly recognized that full understanding of the divine mystery will always allude us. Vilely and dangerously, when we have imagined we can both define and contain the divine mystery.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or more recently the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer is the closest we have come to understanding God. We know that we will always look through a glass darkly when we attempt to understand the mystery of our God and our God's creation. All we can be is ever thankful and ever listening for the Holy Spirit in our hearts and in our minds, and in each other.

Thanks be to God, Amen.