

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity. When we read the readings for today we may wonder, what do these Scripture passages have to do with the Holy Trinity? If you study the Bible you will find that it does not say much about the Trinity. In fact there is no description or definition of the Trinity in the Scripture. You won't find the word Trinity anywhere in Scripture. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity is central to Christianity. It is the litmus test for authentic Christian faith. If any particular denomination does not profess a belief in the Trinity, then they are not considered a true Christian church. So why is this doctrine so important when it is not even found in the Bible? In part, it is because of our Jewish roots.

The Jewish faith is monotheistic. They have the certain belief that there is only one God and there are no others. Christianity is the fulfillment of the Jewish faith, so we too firmly believe in only one God. However, when Jesus walked the earth he demonstrated that he was divine, and eventually acknowledged that he was indeed God. Yet he often spoke about God the Father as separate from himself and spent much time in prayer to the Father. He also spoke of a Holy Spirit, who would come after him, who also possessed divine power. It became very important for the early Church to reconcile her belief in one God and Jesus' revelation of three divine persons. So the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was developed to explain this mystery. But the doctrine was not generated without the influence of Scripture.

Even though the Bible does not define or explain the Trinity, Scripture does frequently illuminate the idea. There are hints and foreshadowings of it in the Old Testament, but the first place we learn about the three persons of the Trinity is at the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel tells Mary she has found favor with God and will bear his son. When she asks, how this can be, the angel tells her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her. In this brief encounter we hear, for the first time, about the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus commissions the Apostles to go out and baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul concludes his second letter to the Corinthians with this blessing, *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with all of you”*, a very Trinitarian blessing. But most significantly, John's Gospel begins with these words *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* and *“... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”*. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus says outright *“The Father and I are one”*. These passages, and others like them, are the seeds of the doctrine of the Trinity. Tradition tells us that the Apostles believed there was one God in three persons. Although their faith was clear, their ability to clearly articulate it was not.

The early Church faced some significant challenges to the idea of the Trinity. Because of them it became very important to clearly state who Jesus was. There have been numerous

heresies that challenged the understanding of the Triune God. One of the most significant challenges was Arianism, which denied the divinity of Jesus. The Arian heresy was important because refuting it was the primary focus of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325. It was at Nicaea that the Trinitarian Creed, which we recite every Sunday, was initially formulated. Although the Church made a definitive statement about the nature of God, Jesus and the Spirit in the Nicene Creed, the Creed does not provide a very satisfying explanation.

The question arises, is it possible to understand the mystery of the Trinity at all? We might begin to think that understanding God is beyond our abilities. But why would God reveal something of himself that is beyond our understanding? What purpose would it serve? It seems he wants to be known by us. He puts a desire to be known in our hearts. That is why we seek to know him, to understand him and to have a relationship with him. What then can help us to gain some insight into this revelation?

There have been many analogies proposed to make sense of the Trinity: St. Patrick suggested the Trinity was like a shamrock, one leaf with three parts; Aquinas suggested it was like a flame's three regions of blue, red and yellow. These illustrate a whole thing with three parts, but they miss an important aspect of the Trinity. In these examples each part is a fraction of the whole. They fail to express a key aspect of the doctrine, that each of the persons of the Trinity are wholly God in themselves. We need take a deeper look.

We humans are defined by our nature and person. Nature tells us what something is, and person tell us who someone is. We all share a human nature, each of us with our own unique version of it. However, in the Trinity there is only one divine nature, it cannot be shared. But there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is one “what” and three “whos”. The three persons are distinct with respect to their relationship with each other.

Now this still may not be satisfying. We can continue to delve more deeply into the philosophical discussion but we will probably never be completely satisfied. The human mind can never fully grasp the mystery of God. At some point we must turn from trying to know God with our intellect, and seek to know him with our hearts. After all, that's what we do with people. We can never truly understand each other, just ask any married couple. But we do get to know each other with our hearts, and that's the kind of knowledge that leads to love.

How do we get to know someone in our hearts? We don't do it by analyzing them. We do it by spending time with them, talking with them, working beside them. So it is with God. We spend time with him here today and at every Mass we attend. We can spend time with him in Adoration. We talk with God in prayer and he talks with us in Scripture. We work with God by caring for the poor, the sick and the dying as Jesus taught us. We build a relationship with God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. It is in this loving relationship that we can begin to truly know and understand the Trinity.

Ultimately the Trinity is a mystery. A mystery is not a truth that we can know nothing about, but a truth that we cannot know everything about. When we contemplate the mystery of the Trinity may our awe of God grow and may our desire to know and understand him draw us into a closer, loving relationship with him.