

Homily for Trinity Sunday
June 7, 2009

Introduction

Today I wish to do something we were warned about long ago when we studied homiletics and the art of preaching: offer a "doctrinal" homily. It was said, quite accurately as it turned out, that homilies on ethics and morality are relatively easy. One can point out without much difficulty what we should and should not do. And in a community like ours speaking about the need for social awareness and social action is well-received. But preaching on a doctrine of faith and trying to make it relevant, accessible to modern people - that's hard work.

Today on the Feast of the Holy Trinity is one day when one cannot escape this task.

I

I am going to do something in this homily which I dislike doing: quote extensively from a theologian. I am going to use a good deal of what my favorite theologian, Sister Elizabeth Johnson who teaches at Fordham University, has to say about the Holy Trinity in her wonderful book "Quest for the Living God". (Beth Johnson, in my opinion and that of others, is the foremost American Catholic theologian today.)

She devotes an entire chapter to the subject of the Trinity and I find in what she says much food for thought.

II

The chapter begins by acknowledging the fact that for modern Catholic-Christians the doctrine of the Holy Trinity doesn't mean a great deal. In Sister Johnson's words this doctrine "has been neglected, treated like a curiosity, or analyzed with conceptual acrobatics entirely inappropriate to its meaning. Consequently, the doctrine has become unintelligible and religiously irrelevant on a wide scale". She goes on to cite Karl Rahner, the preeminent Jesuit theologian of the 20th Century who once "lamented that so weakly does this belief function in the spirituality, theology and actual faith life of the church that if officials announced that a fourth person of the Trinity had been discovered, it would probably cause little stir."

At the same time Johnson quotes another woman theologian, Catherine LaCugna, who insists "the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life."

II

So let's take a look at the way modern theologians express this central belief of the Christian tradition, as outlined in "Quest for the Living God". Let's see how today's

thinkers speak of Father, Son, Holy Spirit; Source of all Being, Eternal Word, Giver of Life; Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier.

According to Elizabeth Johnson, theologian Gordon D Kaufman imagines divine absoluteness, diving humaneness and divine presence as three dimensions of the one living God.

Again, she says that the great Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, posits God as creative power vis-a-vis our finiteness; saving love vis-a-vis our estrangement, and ecstatic transformation in the face of the ambiguity of human existence.

Yet again, Johnson talks about Paul Hodgson who limns the triune figuration as the one (Father) who loves (Son) in freedom (Spirit) in the midst of the world's fractured history. She also says that both Jurgen Moltmann and Leonardo Boff (theologians of liberation) speak of a motherly Father or fatherly Mother, a Jesus who is in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and a Spirit akin to the feminine symbol of Wisdom.

Further, Sally McFague interprets the one God as Mother, Lover and Friend of the world which is God's body.

Letty Russell conceives the Trinity in a functional way as Creator, Liberator and Advocate who calls human beings into partnership with divine care for the world.

Finally, Johnson herself says that a number of biblical texts depict the work of God using the female imagery of Wisdom-Sophia who creates, redeems and makes holy the world. She suggests language of Spirit Sophia, Jesus Sophia and Mother Sophia, the one God who is Holy Wisdom herself: unoriginate source of all, Wisdom incarnate amid the suffering of history, and mobile, gracious presence throughout the world.

It would be good for all of us to read this Chapter from Elizabeth Johnson's book and reflect on these modern and quite relevant images of the Holy Trinity.

IV

Because there are, I believe firmly, practical and radical consequences to these understandings of God's own interior life, as Catherine LaCugna insists. Let us listen again to Johnson on this point. "Deeply harmful attitudes and practices have arisen in church and society because one group imagines itself superior to another. The resulting stratification of power, with some dominant, some subordinate, shapes institutions of racism, sexism, ecclesiastical clericalism and ruination of the earth, among other pernicious sins... The living God is an overflowing communion of self-giving life. The practical importance of this notion lies in the way it exposes the perversion of patriarchy, racism and other sinful patterns. Because such breaks in community totally oppose God's very own way of relating, people of faith have compelling reason to behave otherwise. The Church's [you and I] identity and mission pivot on this point. Called to be a sacrament of the world's salvation, the church [you and I] is to be a living symbol of

divine communion turned toward the world in inclusive and compassionate love. Only a community of equal persons related in profound mutuality, pouring out praise of God and care for the world in need, only such a church corresponds to the triune God it purports to serve.

"God is love...assimilating this truth we gain fresh energies to imagine the world in a loving way and to act to counter the self-destruction of violence...We can tweak Irenaeus's axiom once again to declare: the glory of God is the communion of all things fully alive. Wherever the human heart is healed, justice gains a foothold, peace holds sway, an ecological habitat is protected, wherever liberation, hope and healing break through, wherever an act of simple kindness is done, a cup of cool water given, a book offered to a child thirsty for learning, there the human and earth community already reflect, in fragments, the visage of the trinitarian God. Borne by the 'grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit', we become committed to a fruitful future inclusive of all peoples, tribes and nations, all creatures of the earth. The reign of God gains another foothold in history".

Conclusion

These are thoughts eminently worth going back to time and again. In our preparation for our liturgy today, I was greatly impressed that the planners had a strong sense of the Mystery that is God. The songs we chose for this Eucharistic celebration reflect that conviction "How Great Thou Art" and the wonderful Scottish tune with the words "Holy is God's Name". God is indeed unfathomable, unnamable, beyond our wildest imaginings, totally "Other". But God's transcendence is no excuse for ignoring God's own revelation of God's very self.

Quite simply stated: God is Community, Love and Truth; We humans can be no less.