Trinity Sunday, Cycle A

Old St. Pat’s, 2020

There are many possible motivations

 For joining in this live-stream liturgy from Old St. Pat’s today.

 Some of you are taking this opportunity to reconnect

 With a beloved faith community,

 Old friends,

 Even distant family members

who are sharing in this moment of digital communion

 From various locations.

 Others of you might be looking for a moment of reassurance,

 Of tranquility

 Maybe even of reverence

 In these tumultuous and decidedly irreverent times.

 And, maybe more than usual, many might be looking for meaning

 For a way of discerning a thoughtful path

 appropriate just action

 or even the very presence of God

 In what could appear to be a godless moment

 In our national narrative.

Whatever your personal or religious quest, however,

 You might find the feast that the church presents us today

 A little baffling, possibly mystifying

Or maybe even disappointing.

Trinity Sunday is not a feast

That necessarily stirs the heart

Fires the imagination

Or inspires religious fervor

 Like an Easter, or Pentecost

or even a St. Patrick’s day in certain quarters.

 Maybe if this was “End Racism” Sunday

 Or “Stop the violence” Sunday

 Or “Eradicate Prejudice” Sunday

 Or even “No More George Floyds” Sunday

 There might be a little more enthusiasm

 For what otherwise sounds like a feast

 Right out of the pages of some stuffy catechism

 Or obscure theology book.

But maybe, just maybe, if we dig deeply enough

 We might discover that this mystical liturgy

 This shapeshifter of a feast

 *Is* actually “Stop the violence” Sunday

 *Is* “Eradicate Prejudice” Sunday

 And yes, even *is* “No More George Floyds” Sunday

 Under the guise of the Trinitarian mystery.

One image that often comes to mind for me about this feast

 Is from a now defunct exam

 Formerly given at All Souls College in Oxford

 As part of the application process for that college.

 This particular exam was all focused on a “single word”

 yes … a 3 hour essay on a single noun!

 Offered annually since 1932 until it was discontinued in 2010,

 The unveiling of the word was once such a noteworthy event

 That non-applicants gathered outside the college each year

 waiting for news of “the word” to waft out.

 Applicants themselves discovered the word

 by flipping over a single sheet of paper

 and seeing it printed there, all alone

 as one writer aptly described it:

 like a tiny incendiary device.

 While applicants endured 12 hours of written exams

 over the previous two days

 It is the “one-word” essay that candidates remember best.

 Historian Robin Briggs describes his 1964 essay innocence

 as “an exercise in showmanship

 to avoid answering the question.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Preaching on this Trinity Sunday also threatens to be

 An exercise in homiletic showmanship,

 The preacher dancing around

this almost impenetrable mystery

 Without broaching much less answering

A series of pointed, even blunt questions, such as:

 Who really cares about Trinity Sunday? Or,

 What difference does today’s liturgy really make?

 or what on earth does this feast have to do

with racial injustice

with the divide between law enforcement

 and the citizens they are to protect and serve

or with the unquenched rage

that is erupting on our streets?

An easy way out is for the preacher

simply to parrot lines from today’s readings

 For example,

That all we need to do is to believe,

as the gospel directs,

 That we should give each other a holy kiss,

as St. Paul instructs,

 Or that we must bow down in worship,

as does Moses in the first reading.

 Then all will be right with God, and this sacred festival honored.

 Such parroting, however, misses the theological imperative

 Sitting there like a mystical incendiary device

As we confront the explosive mystery of the Trinity.

Now you might be scratching your head

 questioning how this charming dogma

 the happy community of Father, Son and Spirit

 could possibly be inflammatory, incendiary, or explosive.

 We’ve seen the classic Trinitarian images

 Of Father and Son regally enthroned in heaven

While basking in the Spirit’s light[[2]](#footnote-2)

 Or the classic icon by the great Russian painter Andrei Rublev[[3]](#footnote-3)

 Of three handsome angels

 Gathered around a table, blessing a cup.

 Those seem anything but incendiary

 And light years away from providing any credible response

 To the current tumult.

 Quite frankly, the last thing we need at this moment

 Is leadership in heaven or on earth

 Placidly gathered around a table

Or sitting on a throne from afar

 Unengaged in this life and death struggle for justice.

There are other images of the Trinity, however,

 That might more effectively disclose something

 Of the incendiary nature of this doctrine and feast

 And nudge this liturgy of the church

 Into closer dialogue with the tormented liturgies

unfolding on our city streets.

 There is, for example, the image of the Trinity

 Painted in the tradition of the Crow people by John Giuliani.[[4]](#footnote-4)

 In this depiction Christ wears a warrior shirt

Of ermine skins

 Indicating that he is an “old-time warrior

 Who has captured his enemy’s gun”

 How’s that for incendiary?

 Jesus as a gun-capturing warrior …

 shielded by a warrior wise father

 And enfolded in the wings of a sacred eagle and Great Spirit.

 Now there’s an image of the Trinity that fires my imagination

 And prompts not only reflection

but a distinctive call to action.

More sobering, however, is the Trinitarian image

 By the Italian renaissance painter Taddeo Crivelli[[5]](#footnote-5)

 in which the entire Trinity seems suspended on the cross:

 A virtually crucified Trinity on a blood red background

 Embracing the sacrifice of the only-begotten

 This Trinitarian image recalls the execution of an innocent man

 And places the Father and Spirit

 As eternal witnesses to this inhumanity

 Sanctioned by legitimate local governmental authority of the time

 And witnessed by a throng of enthusiastic bystanders.

As Crivelli theologizes in parchment and paint

Jesus did not die alone on the cross

 For the Father and Spirit were nailed there with him.

 The unity of Father, Son and Spirit

 Thus was not sundered by crucifixion

 But welded even more fiercely together in that brutal moment

 Captured in this cosmic family portrait.

 And in that holy crucible,

as blood and water poured from the side of Christ

 a movement in baptism and eucharist was born,

 a way to authentic life was inaugurated

 and a church was birthed

 whose only redemptive road

for those who dare to make the baptismal journey

is through the messiness of humanity

 through the trials and challenges

 that purify us in God’s scorching spirit.

We are a stiff necked people, as Moses proclaims

 A society marked by goodness and grace

 But also by wickedness and sin

 Arrogance and power mongering

 Racism and injustice.

 And like the Father and the Spirit

 No matter what the color of our skin

 Or our national origin

 By taking on the baptismal garment

we are all nailed to the cross of prejudice and inequality.

 And when one Emmett Till dies

 Or a Michael Brown

 Or an Eric Garner

 Or a Trayvon Martin

 Or a Laquan McDonald

 Or a George Floyd

 Each created in the image of God

 When one dies, the whole body of Christ suffers.

 And in that suffering

 Another movement must be born again,

 Christianity need be renewed

 And the promise of resurrected human dignity for all

 Must be restored.

Paul warns the followers of Jesus in his time

 That they must mend their ways and learn to live in peace.

 That admonition is greatly amplified today.

 Our Catholic-Christian faith is not a shield against racism

 Nor is it a symbol to hide behind in these heart wrenching times.

 Rather it is a mandate for action

 A call to stand with Christ the spiritual warrior

 Replacing the guns with hospitality

 The violence with empathy

 The prejudice with respect

 And over all of these, embodying a spirit of selfless love.

Catherine LaCugna, in her now classic exploration of the Trinity

 Presents the three-in-one God as a God who is “for us.”

 For LaCugna the doctrine of the Trinity is not some fancy theory

 But has practical implications for Christian life,

An understanding of Trinity

That demands “living Gods life with one another.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

 This means mirroring the mutuality

 The all-embracing personhood

 The eternal respect

 The divine care for every child of God

 That is the very definition of this three-in-one holiness.

And so I come to a final image of the Trinity:

a literary image from the Italian poet Dante

Who in the final canto of his *Divine Comedy*

 brings the reader into the presence of God.

 Bathed in light in the ascent into paradise

everything in the universe is connected in love.

 Then 3 circles of identical dimensions appear,

 Each with its own color,

 A striking image of unity and diversity.

 But maybe, most incendiary

 At the center of the 2nd circle, the Christ

 is painted *la nostra effige* **[[7]](#footnote-7)**

 The human image and likeness.

 Humanity, itself, is taken up into divinity

 And the face of each child of God

 The face of every George Floyd and Emmett Till

Is eternally embedded in the Trinity.

God has made a covenant with us in Christ

 That this Holy three-in-oneness

 will be forever *for* us, and forever be *with* us.

 That covenantal commitment, however,

Makes a startling, incendiary demand of us creatures,

 That we be not only faithful to God

 But that we commit ourselves to be forever

Faithful to each other

 *La nostra effige*

 Living an eternal one-ness

 With each human being

And honoring them as God’s own continuing incarnation.

As we pray for peace and reconciliation in these troubling times

 We also commit ourselves, as the poet muses,

 To be for and with each other

To go wherever the other must travel

To witness their dying and their rising

 And through it all never, never leave them alone[[8]](#footnote-8)

 Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. Sarah Lyall, “Oxford Tradition comes to this: ‘Death’ (Expound),” <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/28/world/europe/28oxford.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.mybscc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/trinidad-768x480.jpg> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity\_(Andrei\_Rublev)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_%28Andrei_Rublev%29) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.bridgebuilding.com/narr/gctr.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/225482/taddeo-crivelli-initial-b-the-trinity-italian-about-1460-1470/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Catherine LaCugna, *God For us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 411. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dante, *Paradiso,* Canto 33, line 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rory Cooney, “Covenant Hymn.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)