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)> [↑](#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)