

Sermon for Trinity Sunday

RCL Lectionary

[Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31](#) / [Canticle 13](#) / [Romans 5:1-5](#) / [John 16:12-15](#)

May 30th, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Cardinal, The Rack!

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Well, it's been quite a week. The strangest weather we've seen at the end of May in a long while, getting ready for holiday weekend, rushing towards finals, exams, graduation, straining at the oars of getting things buttoned down before summer vacations begin. Oh, and I was accused of heresy this week. Didn't you hear?

Many of you know my enjoyment of writing, and once a month, I've been graciously invited to post a reflection on a widely read online church news and commentary site, the Episcopal Café. So about a week ago now, up went my meditation on that old Christian virtue of chastity, and how it leads to charity. Sounds pretty innocuous, right?

Funny thing was, my words inadvertently triggered a firestorm on a number of arch-conservative websites, especially one run by the canon theologian of another diocese. His own post about my piece, and the discussion that followed, shredded my reflection in order to tell the world everything that he thought was wrong with The Episcopal Church today. Wow!

Then there was a nasty string of comments that ensued, and the epithets and smears piled up pretty quickly. Out of the gate, I was already accused of being Humpty Dumpty, as in the nineteenth century character in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* who says a word means what he says it means. And then to add to the oddity of that accusation came a handful of old Christian swear words: like gnosticism. Ladle onto that the generic label heresy and add dashes of deconstructionist and revisionist, and it really was *Alice in Wonderland* for me. After falling down the rabbit hole, I was served up a wild dish at the Mad Hatter's tea party!

So now I had ostensibly committed heresy of several varieties – quite an achievement for a handful of paragraphs, if I say so myself – and heresy, I might add, from a number of different centuries. If being a Humpty Dumpty put me somewhere in the nineteenth century, then Gnosticism had me pegged somewhere in antiquity: the second century, perhaps. Whereas deconstructionism was very postmodern and revisionism was a general catch-all for “what you're saying threatens my belief system.”

Well, I just had to join in the fun. So for good measure, I threw in some spice from the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century by reflecting on a famous Monty Python skit. For, after all, “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!” And then I recognized how glad I am that I don’t live in the sixteenth century, where an accusation of heresy might have had me on a cart headed out to a rather unpleasant Memorial Day barbecue with me served up as the main and only course.

But not to worry. I’m still here today, the cardinals in red have not shown up to tie me to the rack, and the good news is that in The Episcopal Church these days, formal charges of heresy, even if they are leveled by canon theologians, need a lot more to go on than just a meditation on an old Christian virtue. A colleague reminded me this week of G. K. Chesterton’s line: “I believe in getting into hot water. It keeps you clean.” And the hot water of “surprise, fear, and ruthless efficiency” left me in some very esteemed company, from friends and colleagues in the church I deeply respect all the way up the line to our Presiding Bishop. She and so many have been excoriated in recent years, attacked by the same largely anonymous group on the same clutch of websites. I guess it was my turn, though I didn’t even realize I was standing in line!

But in an odd way, I ended up with a most fascinating gift this week between Pentecost and today, Trinity Sunday – that of a personal glimpse into the heated doctrinal controversies that gave rise to our core Trinitarian beliefs as Christians.

The Trinitarian formula and the settled doctrine of the Nicene Creed were culminations of centuries of debate in a diverse church. These controversies came to a head in the fourth century when a number of thinkers and ecclesiastical heavy-weights – Arius, Alexander, and Athanasius – led their followers into an all out knock-down drag-out over just who Jesus was in relationship to God. The Emperor Constantine, seeing the power of Christianity to unite his Empire, began to worry this Christian-against-Christian mess was threatening the very fabric of his enterprise, so he did what many astute politicians do when faced with battling factions within their borders. He forced together all the fighting elements in Nicaea and demanded they settle their differences once and for all. It worked. Sort of. Only it really took 65 years, the exile and death of those who disagreed, and it was one of Constantine’s heirs who oversaw the amendments that led to the final version of the Creed we have today.

So lesson number one is very clear to me: If you want unity of doctrine and belief, you’d better be prepared to wait a long time. (It takes more than a website, and it helps to have the threat of force behind you if you want to see it done.) Lesson number two is in the content of the creed itself. If you want something that will last, better keep it as simple and to the point as possible. Even in our sound-byte driven age, the Nicene Creed rambles only a little bit, and the language is pretty pithy. That’s an achievement, really, for the ages. We admire, for instance, our nation’s Constitution for its erudition and flexibility, but it is quite a bit longer than the Nicene Creed and has lasted (may it continue to last) for under 250 years. The Creed has spanned numerous

cultures and the rise and fall of nations for well over 1,500 years. But lesson number three is the hardest. If you think established doctrine ends disagreement in the Body of Christ for all time, think again. At the council of Nicaea, the seats were still warm and the ink on the paper was barely dry when the seeds of new doctrinal controversies were already starting to germinate. The Roman Empire later collapsed. The Church went into schism. . . more than once. Later it roiled in Reformation and Counter-reformation. Today, we are turning yet another corner headed we know not quite where just yet in a post- post-modern era that has no name. We are human beings, after all, and whatever God might agree with God's self over, we can be quite determined to fight about it whether we need to or not. Maybe that's what my little dust-up in the blogosphere was all about this week. Some people just like a good war of words, and my offering was just grist for the mill this time around.

So what we have inherited is a Trinitarian creed with that for its lasting quality has none of the colorful stories of Genesis or Kings; none of the fiery zeal of the prophets or the age-old wisdom of Proverbs or the bellyaching of Job; none of the fervor and Spirit-filled, bracing rhetorical wit of a letter from Paul; nor the adventures of the Apostles; nor any of the vivacity of one of Jesus' parables, or the beauty of the narrative of his birth or the pathos of his crucifixion and wonder of his resurrection. In the Creed, the Church has inherited a political document, hammered out over forced compromise in a philosophical framework that is almost as alien to us as the ancient tongue in which it was first composed.

Yet it remains, oddly enough, something we are required by the wider Church to pray each Sunday. Yes, pray. Not simply recite with our fingers crossed behind our backs or with carefully dropped words. But pray. Why?

Many reasons. One is that this a Creed that we share, for better and for worse, with churches around the world. A Creed that reflects in its breadth a shared heritage of an imperfect and ever evolving institution, a forever leaky vessel in need of constant repairs and upgrades overseen by an often mutinous and fractious crew, but a sea-worthy ship nevertheless still meant to carry that most beautiful of all communities spanning the ages: the Body of Christ. The Creed links us with our past. It reminds us we are never inventing ourselves anew out of whole cloth, but re-weaving a well-worn and beloved garment that has held our history, that reminds us of our roots, our heritage.

Another reason we pray the Creed is that we need some kind of touchstone, some place to begin saying who we are as a Christian people. We need a place to start our journey in Christ. Our Anglican forbears, having survived all the fractious nastiness, creativity, and dynamism of the Reformation, taught us to learn to hold doctrine, to hold our orthodoxy lightly – to be ready to adapt with the changing needs and understandings that are forever in our future, and most assuredly the ever present and daily disagreements among God's people. But we needed a spine,

a skeleton, able to support and offer definition to that ever-evolving body of beliefs, canons, and ideas. That skeleton for us is the Creed.

Life has changed a great deal from the sixteenth century to the present. We have changed in subtle and substantial ways in the Church over those many generations. The Creed is not the body of our faith. It is the skeleton that needs the rushing blood of the sacraments and digestion of our sacred stories, the water of baptism and oxygen of the Spirit, the tensions of disagreement and the pushing and pulling of muscle in apostolic community, the senses of our experience and the depths of our collective memory in the places in Creation we find ourselves – guiding and coordinating all of the diverse parts of the Body from one act of offering and mission to another. The Creed provides us with a skeletal framework to start the building and the heavy lifting of living out the mission of the Gospel. But the Creed is not that life itself.

We pray the Creed not simply to offer our intellectual assent to it, but to come into relationship with the “who we are” and the “who God is” the Creed reflects. It’s not so important if in any one reading we chafe against a word here or there, or leave some of it not at all understood for further exploration tomorrow – it is the relationship in the end that matters. For we are creatures related to our history, related, yes, to our political present and past. Related to a bumbling body of Christians across the ages who have done wonderful and awful things, feeling, as we do so often in the dark, their way in the paths that lead to our loving God. A body dependent not ultimately on intellectual assent or our own hard work, but rather leaning with the weight of our whole lives – messy as they might be – leaning, resting even, on the trust in what God has done for us, in the grace the Creed is intended to disclose to us.

Finally today, it is this Creed that points to the Triune God, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” into whose life we were baptized. And our understanding of that God is not one of settled certainty, but a tension, a mysterious and wondrous dance, a set of relationships that are personal and dynamic – a God whose wisdom, as we hear from Proverbs this day, was from before time, her creative vigor touching every part of the cosmos, every particle, every cell in our body, constantly re-creating us and everything else; a God who in Jesus Christ lives among us and within us, born to us, who taught us and fed us, who died and rose for us, who dies with us, and rises to new life so that we may be raised anew; a God who in the Holy Spirit is not tamed by doctrine but who blows apart our narrow boxes and definitions with every breath. There are thousands of ways to describe the Trinity, but this three-in-one God is the one God we worship – a God who embraces and embodies all of our diversity, our disagreements, our gifts, and sends us forth a people forgiven, healed, renewed, bringing this abundant life to a troubled world.