

Trinity Sunday and the Book of Common Prayer

by Elizabeth Apgar Triano

Trinity Sunday is the Sunday after Pentecost. Pentecost, or Whitsuntide, commemorates the day when the Holy Spirit came to the apostles and the people, famous as looking like tongues of flame over their heads (Acts, Chapter 2). From Easter to Pentecost is the season of Easter, called by some the Great Fifty Days.

A handy definition of Trinity Sunday may be found in Wall's A New Dictionary for Episcopalians: "The first Sunday after Pentecost, and the only day in the church year to commemorate a doctrine and not a person or an event. This day remembers God's gift to us of knowledge of the divine nature." That is an interesting way of putting it; it seems to circumvent the question of what, exactly, is the Trinity, and how can it be Three and One at the same time?

The Collects for Trinity can be found on page 228 of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, for the Contemporary version, and on page 176 for the Traditional version. It has changed little since 1662, and likely little also since 1549 (I don't have a copy of the 1549 version handy). I will split the difference and provide the Traditional version:

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity: We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see thee in thy one and eternal glory, O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Spirit livest and reignest, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

To many people, Trinity Sunday is the day we sing all seven verses of Saint Patrick's Breastplate ("I bind unto myself today"). St. Patrick is perhaps the most popular of the saints associated with the doctrine of the Trinity; he is said to have used the Shamrock as an illustrative aid of how something can be three and one at the same time.

The doctrine of the Trinity has been a ticklish one since the beginning of Christianity, and remains a point upon which Christendom still does not completely agree, but it is not generally a topic for heated discussion.

Christian heresies aren't the cause for commotion today, in the Christian West anyway, that they were in the past, but if you have heard of the Spanish Inquisition, and the Crusades, and the Arian and Manichean heresies, just to name a few, you will realize that there has been more than a little strife in church history. Inconveniences such as literacy, languages and distance were among the things that made it hard to maintain a standardized system of belief – not to mention an occasional lack of concord amongst the leaders themselves.

In recent times (more or less) we have had the many layers of the Protestant Reformation. But before that, we had the early church fathers. Augustine of Hippo is perhaps one of the most famous, and among his proteges was Athanasius, Bishop of

Alexandria. In the church year, we remember Augustine on May 26th, and Athanasius on May 2nd.

In the back of our own Book of Common Prayer there are many useful things! We have a section called “Historical Documents,” known fondly to some as “hysterical documents,” but they are good reading now and then. On page 845 you will find the beginning of “**An Outline of the Faith**, commonly called the Catechism.” It is simple and straightforward. Page 852 gets into the subjects of the Creeds and the Holy Spirit. At one point it says:

“Q. What, then is the Athanasian Creed?”

A. The Athanasian Creed is an ancient document proclaiming the nature of the Incarnation and of God as Trinity.”

There they are referring to the Creed on page 864, the “**Quicumque Vult** *commonly called The Creed of Saint Athanasius.*” It is generally agreed that this prayer was put together after the death of Athanasius in 336, but it outlines the doctrine of the Trinity as put forth and defended by the Bishop of Alexandria during a time when that doctrine was being sorely tested. Apparently its literary style is also indebted to one Vincent of Lerins, an early church father from the area now known as France. I had not heard of this Saint Vincent before, and from what little I have read so far it seems like he was not in complete agreement with Augustine in other areas.

By the way, although I am fond of bound books, the Internet is also a handy source of information even about these old topics. As with any other subject, surf and read carefully and be critical as well as curious.

The following is mostly summarized from Hatchett’s wonderful Commentary on the American Prayer Book: For some centuries, the Quicumque Vult was recited in the church about once a month, in rotation with the Nicene and Apostles Creeds. Over time, it was apparently so long and awkward that public use dropped to once a year, on Trinity Sunday. Then for a while it was dropped from the prayer book entirely! But then it was returned, and placed among the Historical Documents, although it is not required for use any longer.

Returning to the Historical Documents of our Book of Common Prayer, just above the Quicumque Vult is a dense paragraph entitled “Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ,” from the Council of Chalcedon, 451 A.D. This is a very famous and significant document, and the Council was an important gathering, sort of like one of Lambeth’s more critical , but from a time when the Church really was One – young, growing, chaotic and argumentative, but officially undivided. This Council followed the previous century’s Council of Constantinople, where the Nicene Creed, already in existence since at least an earlier council in 325, was expanded, and is essentially a follow-up and confirmation of that work.

The reason that we have these documents is that there were powerful factions in those days, which proclaimed different versions of the nature of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Christianity, coming from the monotheistic Judaism, is also monotheistic – and yet we have the Three Persons of the Trinity. How can that be? Does that not make

Christians polytheistic? Somehow, the answer must be no. And the doctrine of the Trinity, hammered and worked over the ages, is Christianity's answer to that question.

These questions did not go away after the first millennium. In 1801, the young Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America produced the Articles of Religion which are handily reproduced in our Book of Common Prayer, beginning on page 867. The first Article is about... you guessed it! The Trinity.

Selected Sources:

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Wainwright, Geoffrey, and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, The Oxford History of Christian Worship. Oxford University Press, New York. 2006.

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