

You may not realize it, but the Trinity might be considered the single most defining doctrine of Christianity. Many people have no concept of how important the doctrine of the Trinity really is. Because you cannot talk about any truly important aspect of our faith without talking in Trinitarian terms.

You cannot talk about creation without talking about God the Father. You cannot talk about salvation without talking about God the Son. You cannot talk about the Church without talking about God the Holy Spirit. In short, you cannot talk about any other Christian doctrine without first talking about the Trinity.

Which is the reason why we believe, teach, and confess that any person who denies the Trinity has put themselves outside of the Christian church and outside of God's grace. It is the foundation to anything we say about the incarnation or the crucifixion or the resurrection. To deny the Trinity is to deny who Jesus is and what he did for us. It's that important.

So that's one reason why we have a Trinity Sunday every year. Of course, we also need Trinity Sunday because out of all the teachings of the church, the Trinity is possibly the one most difficult to get your head around. In fact, I generally start teaching the Trinity with this preface: if you think you understand it, that's a pretty good sign that you're wrong.

And, trust me, plenty of people have tried to understand it. Do an internet search for “Trinity analogies” and you will get a thousand and one different object lessons about the Trinity. Three leaf clovers and the three phases of water and three parts to an egg. On and on.

And they will all be wrong. I guarantee it. Because you cannot make an analogy for a paradox. You cannot logically explain something that logically shouldn't exist. But does.

The single most important characteristic of the Trinity is the very fact that it is beyond our understanding. You wanna worship one god. Great! Go be a Jew. Or a Muslim. Or a Ba'hai. Or a Sikh. Or a Jehovah's Witness. They're all strict monotheists. And it makes perfect sense to them.

You wanna worship three gods? Fine. Go be a Hindu. Or a Buddhist. Or an Animist. Or a Wiccan. Or a Mormon. They're all polytheists. And it makes perfect sense to them. But to be a Christian, you have to worship one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And it does not make sense, to us or anyone else.

And believe me when I say it would be easier if there were a way around it. I don't really blame people for trying to make sense of it all. It's human nature. And if this were a perfect world, without the cloud of sin and corruption that hangs over our minds, we might very well understand it all. We might look at every paradox of the Christian faith and know exactly how it worked and why God did it the way He did.

That's really Jesus' message to Nicodemus in our Gospel lesson. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. And he's not just any Pharisee. He's a member of the ruling council. And what this means is that he's one of the preeminent Jewish scholars of his day. He is an Ivy-league professor. He is a best-selling author. He is a Supreme Court Justice. He is at the top of whatever it is you use to gauge intelligence and respect.

And he comes to Jesus with a much more reasonable, thoughtful approach than many of the Pharisees come with. For one thing, he call Jesus “rabbi,” which itself is a pretty humbling thing to do for a man in his position. Because it means that he, in all his scholarly glory, comes to Jesus as a student, expecting to learn something new.

And then he tells Jesus, “We know you are from God. We know you're a prophet. We know that no one could do the things you do except a man of God. So please, teach us something. Teach us something divine. Teach us something heavenly.”

So Jesus teaches him. “No man can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Now, that phrase – “born again” – is commonly used among Christians today, but back then it was a completely unfamiliar expression. And Nicodemus is baffled by it. “What are you talking about? Born again? You're not talking about literally, physically going back to our mothers and being born all over again, are you? Cause that's just weird, Jesus.”

But, of course, Jesus isn't talking about that. “No, you need to be born again of water and the Spirit. You need to be born again by baptism. You've already been born one time, but it was merely a physical birth, by your physical parents. Now you need to be born again spiritually. You need to have a spiritual rebirth, by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Nicodemus still doesn't get it. How could he? He's a Jew. He has no concept of the Trinity. He has no idea how he could be talking to God the Son, sent from God the Father, about the rebirth given by God the Holy Spirit. It makes no sense to him. And honestly, if we really try to think about it, it doesn't make much sense to us either.

But that's OK. Jesus isn't angry with him. Frustrated? Yeah, he's seems a little frustrated. “Come on... you're one of Israel's teachers. I've already dumbed this down for you. I'm talking to you in earthly terms. About things like childbirth and the washing of water. Trust me, you don't want me to talk to you in heavenly terms. That'll really blow your mind.”

“And I could. Because I've been there. I came down from heaven. But that's not why I'm here. You think I'm here to be a rabbi. A prophet. To teach you through words and explanations all these things about God that you don't understand. But you're never going to understand. Not in earthly terms. Not in heavenly terms. You're never going to understand anything unless its shown to you.”

That's why Jesus came to earth. He came to be that bronze serpent lifted on a staff. He was crucified to be the embodiment of all the sin and wrath and judgment that we deserve, so that we could see it all nailed to the cross. He was lifted up in death so that everyone might look to him, believe, and have eternal life.

You see, God's expectations of us are really pretty small. He doesn't expect us to understand the Trinity. Or the Incarnation. Or the Sacraments. These are heavenly things that can only truly be described in heavenly terms. And we are earthly beings explaining things in earthly terms.

And those earthly terms can sound pretty ridiculous at times when trying to explain the heavenly. But that's OK. We don't need to understand the Trinity. God gave us something far simpler to understand. His one and only son. A man attested to us by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in our midst. A man delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

A man who didn't come into the world to condemn it for failing to understand every single point of theology. But a man who came into the world to save it. And, instead of teaching us about the fulness of the Trinity and teaching us the fulness of God's love in terms that we would never understand, he showed us the fulness of the Trinity by being born of Mary and he showed us the fulness of God's love by dying on the cross.

And that's why the doctrine of the Trinity is so vitally important to us. Not because we understand what the Trinity is. But because we've witnessed the Trinity at work. We have been a part of the Trinity's work. The Father so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life through the rebirth of water and the Holy Spirit.

It's all right there in a nutshell. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all working for our salvation. So as Jesus explains earlier, you don't need to understand where the wind comes from to hear it blow. Just listen and you'll know its there. You don't need to understand how the Trinity works to hear God at work. To hear God's love. To hear God's salvation. To hear you have eternal life with Him. Just listen to His Word and you'll know He's there. Amen.