

**John 14:15** “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

**John 14:18** “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”



*Persona - Behind the Masks*

I had to grin a little about 10 years ago when a new Confirmation class was starting at my last church. Those 6 kids had to write things in their little books, and answer some questions. One question was *What do you hope to understand better when we are done with confirmation?* I grinned because one of our young ones said he wanted to make sense of the Trinity. It is something we need to understand, as much as we can, although people kind of avoid it. There is a trail that can be followed, back, back, back to the early centuries of Christianity, and there are things that we can know. I look forward to more discussions about things like this around tables here in our church.

I don't mean to be blunt with this, but it would probably make sense that many people imagine that everything we believe as Christians comes from the Bible. That is not always the case. The NT was not officially the NT until the year 431, 1600 years ago. We had Christians being Christians without a NT for 350 years. That's the

truth. And certain doctrines of the Church developed without people quoting chapter and verse of NT books. But they believed things nonetheless. Just for the record, it was in the 4th century, what we might call the “300’s” that much of the explaining was done about this idea that we call the Trinity. More about that another day.

As this is Trinity Sunday, and I haven’t really approached it for 5 years, we can go to a favorite NT passage that might be helpful. So, what about John today? John has a great thing to say in chapter 14 about the coming of the *Paraklitos*, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Jesus here is being very comforting, letting his people know that when he is gone he will not leave them as orphans. They will have a Comforter. Now, this has caused some difficulty. People end up asking the question: Was there no Holy Spirit until Jesus was gone? Because John makes it sound like Jesus must die and be resurrected, and then he will be replaced by this other presence. But is that how it all worked? We have difficulties with this. The Gospel of Luke makes it very clear that Elizabeth and Zechariah, parents of John the Baptist, were filled with the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus was conceived from the Holy Spirit, so it looks like the Holy Spirit is in fact around before Jesus is born! We have Luke, the 3rd Gospel, and John the 4th Gospel, and they say different things about this. What do we do then?

Well, we do this... We move to the ancient creeds of the Church, and see what is what. And we check out some history. Let’s go with the history first.

Question: In the Roman Empire did people believe in God, or many gods? Probably both. But there were many beliefs in gods ( in fact they had a temple in Rome called the PANTHEON which I visited, where you would find shrines to all kinds of different gods ). Now if you were the earliest Church, long ago, and a small group in the Roman Empire, what might you do to help people understand your

particular belief in God, and to distinguish your God from all other beliefs? Well, Christians absolutely believed in God the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth. This came directly from the beliefs of ancient Israel. So that was there. But then there was Jesus, and then there was Jesus as the Risen Christ. Folks began to believe that this Jesus was the son of God, or a revealer of God. To talk about God, Christians had to also include Jesus, because He was clearly a part of the deal. Paul proclaims in the opening words of Romans that Jesus is proclaimed SON of God because of his resurrection!

And then, once Jesus was gone, there was this Presence of God, and the Risen Christ, that was still guiding the Church. The SPIRIT of God has called us to know God in this newly developed way, involving Jesus and the Spirit as well. If the Spirit is with us, that means that GOD is with us too. So all of this is a new way of seeing God, but it comes from the hand of God, to reach the Gentiles, non-Jewish people in the world. So, maybe to explain their God, Christians developed the idea of God which includes the Creator Father, and Jesus the Redeemer, and the Spirit. And they added a neat idea. PERSONA, PERSONAE. ( see slide at the beginning! )

How many times have we sung, “God in three persons, blessed Trinity”? God in *three persons*? This expression comes from an early Roman belief. Let’s get a look at our next slide. Guess what those are? PERSONAE. I double-checked my Latin dictionary and there it was: Persona, ae *f* “mask” These are masks used by actors in the ancient world. In drama, people could play many characters by wearing different masks. It is ultimately the same person behind the masks. The early Church Fathers said that this was how their God acted. It is one God, who has acted in three personae, who has interacted with the Church in 3 key ways. God the Father is the

Creator, Jesus the Son is the Redeemer and Savior, and the Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier, the one who works to make us Holy.

In some ways this seems to have been designed to tell people about how our God acts. Does it say that there are 3 different Gods? It shouldn't, although some people have seen it that way. BTW, this is one key reason that Jews and Muslims are not Christians, because they think that we actually believe in more than one God. Let's remember that ultimately the word for Trinity is actually ***Tri-unity*** which means a three-ness which is really one. But let's remember something else that is even more important. We are trying to talk about God, the ultimate mystery of all. We are trying to discuss a Being so beyond ourselves, and we try to do it with our little human words, which don't cover as much ground as we might think.

Should we believe in the Trinity? Absolutely. I will never give a benediction without saying *“In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”* It doesn't mean we have 3 Gods. It means that we believe in God who has acted in 3 very special ways, through the Father Creator, through Jesus the redeemer, and through the ongoing Presence of God we call the Holy Spirit. This is our God. And that is how it has made sense for us to talk about this God. I would add that this is how God has decided to reveal God-self to us and to the Church. We need to be careful to keep ourselves from making it sound like we have 3 Gods. And as I always enjoy telling people on days when we have baptisms, all that is needed for Baptism, which is intended to be a once-in-a-lifetime event, all that is needed is some amount of water, and the name of the Trinity. And may our belief in the Trinity remind us that our God is a Mystery, and that some things we just take on faith. May God, the Three in One, bless and keep us and all the world. AMEN.