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# Festival of the Holy Trinity

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**M**any years ago, while I was still a student at seminary, I was visiting one day with a family who had somewhat adopted my wife and me. Their youngest daughter, who was about four years old at the time, was busy with some watercolours, painting a piece of wood. Finally, when she had finished with her masterpiece, she came over and presented it to me as a present. Now to be quite candid, I was unable to distinguish anything recognizable in the painting at all, and so, as innocently as possible, I said, "This is beautiful Sarah, can you tell me about it?" Well, four year old Sarah was not impressed. She put her hands on her hips and gave me a glare which would have melted stone, and then shaking her head replied, "Can't you tell? It's God...sitting down."

Now we may be inclined to smile at Sarah's innocent attempt to portray God in visual form...and sitting down at that, obviously wearied by the concerns of the world. Yet in another sense, her attempt reflects something which is not only utterly serious, but which is profoundly human...our attempts to give form and expression to the one whom we call "God".

Have you ever thought about the different ways that people picture God? I am told that if you walk through many of the ancient cathedrals in Europe, especially ones which were built over several centuries, that you will find an amazing range of statues and carvings and stained glass, all reflecting the attempt of the builders to give expression and to create an atmosphere which tells us something about how they saw and understood God.

If, in similar fashion, you consider the cathedral of your own heart, starting with your childhood, then continuing through youth and into adult years, and if you stop along the way and examine those places where you knelt in great joy or in great pain, you may well be astonished at the variety of your own images and understandings of God. Our impressions and presumptions about God change over time and much of this change simply represents our maturing as persons. As Susan White, who has worked with our Open Sesame preschoolers for 29 years can assure us, just because a child completes preschool does not mean that his or her education is complete. Our thought, and especially our ability to think conceptually and metaphorically, become more sophisticated as we grow up. So as we grow, a greater range of experience and responsibility will pull us into a more complex understanding and reflection upon the nature of God.

The cathedral of stone and glass, the cathedral of the heart, and our relationships with other people, can provide a way for us to think about the church's teachings about God, and the relationship of those teachings to our lives as individual believers.

You see, just as our lives are marked by a growing maturity, and by a process of development in our understanding and imaging of God, so too the life of the church reveals an increasing theological sophistication, a sophistication that directly resulted from Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Different nations have different ways of thinking, different languages, different cultures. So as the early church grew and spread, encountering different peoples and diverse languages, such differences inevitably led to variations in the expression of the Christian faith.

By the time that Matthew wrote his Gospel, some fifty or sixty years after Jesus' earthly ministry, the church had already begun to develop some of its distinctive practices of worship. As inheritors of the rich traditions from the temple and synagogue, the early Christians modified and developed their ancient practices in light of the Gospel. Matthew employed some of the language which was characteristic of this worship in the closing verses of his Gospel, when – in the words of the Great Commission – Jesus charges his disciples to go forth as witnesses to the Gospel, charging them to "baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". At this point in the church's history, those simple words did not carry all of the elaborate theological meanings and

nuances which developed over the ensuing centuries.

Now as the church began to spread around the Mediterranean basin, it encountered peoples whose ways of thinking and talking about God included philosophical forms of thought. As they heard and believed the Gospel, they wanted to understand more precisely this God who has been revealed as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What was the character of this God, they wondered, this God who was One, but who in God's very being was characterized by a relationship between three parts? Who was this one God, revealed to humanity in three different ways? As a result of their reflections, they formulated the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, teachings that went far beyond the original meaning of Matthew's language. Their understanding of God, who has been revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has not only been found meaningful by countless generations, but has shaped our understanding and imaging of God.

To return to our earlier analogy, they added to the cathedral in the heart new and more intricate images of God, new ways of reflecting upon the One who created us, who renews us, and who sustains us, this God who stands at the centre of our faith and hope.

Now I would suggest to you, on this festival of the Holy Trinity, as we gather with Christians around the world to celebrate specifically the triune-God, that there are two ways of thinking about these developments in the doctrine of God. One way would be to suggest that the process has ended, that the cathedral of belief is now a finished building, to which nothing more can or needs to be added. While having some appeal, such a conclusion would also seem to suggest that we have God "all figured out", which we certainly do not! But there is another alternative; that would be to suggest that the cathedral is still under construction, that the story of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is really a parable illuminating our need to continue reflecting upon God in light of the novel ways that human thought and culture are always evolving and changing. We honour what our ancestors in the faith did and believed, by taking seriously their efforts to understand God. But we also honour them by continuing such efforts in our own day. And in doing that we do something even more important: we honour the living God who is greater than all of our human formulations and doctrines, the God who is shrouded in mystery, yet also the God who loves us so intensely; the God who – in Christ Jesus – took on human form and taught us how to die so that we may truly live; the God whose Spirit enlivens all creation. It is this

God who calls to us today – and every day – calling us to rededicate ourselves so that God may live in us and through us.

May it be so. Amen.