

Message for June 7, 2020

Matthew 28:16-20

It was the year 561 AD and a fierce battle was fought in the vicinity of Carbury in Ireland. On the one side was the High King of Ireland; on the other were the O'Neills, a very wealthy and powerful clan. The battle was savage and it is said that by its end thousands of men had been killed. But what was the cause of such mayhem? The pride of a young man named Colm Cille, destined to become famous as St. Columba.

Colm Cille was a member of the royal house of the O'Neills and lived a very pampered life. To put it bluntly, he had a strong sense of entitlement and a quick temper as well. When he grew up, Colm Cille decided that God had called him to be a monk and, with the help of his wealthy and powerful relations, he quickly became a leader in the church.

Back in those days there was no such thing as a printing press and so all books had to be copied out by hand. Because of the labour involved books were both valuable and prized possessions. One day Colm Cille 'borrowed' a richly decorated psalm book without asking the owner's permission and then made his own copy of it. When the rightful owner demanded that it be returned, Colm Cille refused. The owner then appealed to the High King for justice and he ordered that Colm Cille return both the original book and the copy as well. Colm Cille however, refused and appealed to his kinsmen for help. Using this dispute as a pretext for settling their own quarrels with the King, the O'Neills responded positively; the result was the battle of Carbury which was a complete victory for the O'Neills.

After the battle however Colm Cille was horrified. He claimed to be a disciple of Jesus, the one who preached a gospel of love, peace and forgiveness and now thousands had died because of his pride and arrogance! Overwhelmed by remorse he decided to leave Ireland and go into exile. Accompanied by a handful of followers, he set sail and landed on Iona, the first island from which he could no longer see his homeland.

He established a thriving monastery on Iona but, being the man that he was, he wasn't one to sit still. He decided to become a missionary and travel around what is now Scotland, spreading the good news of the gospel.

On his first missionary journey he traveled up the Great Glen to what is now Inverness. It is said that as he and his companions walked along the shores of Loch Ness, they were confronted by the fabled monster. St. Columba, as he was now called, showed no fear and at his command the monster sank back into the murky depths. Then, a little further along, a group of pagan priests tried to stop him. Columba simply started reciting the words of a psalm and they fled in terror. When he arrived at the king's palace and knocked on the gates the king refused to open them. Columba simply knocked on them again and they swung wide open! At this point, so the story goes, the king saw the light; he and his kingdom converted to Christianity. And this was just the beginning of Columba's missionary work in Scotland but why am I sharing these facts and legends with you this morning? Simply because of what today is.

Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost, is Trinity Sunday and today's traditional theme is that of remembering what God is like. And what is God like? We say so, perhaps without ever thinking about it, every Sunday morning when we gather to worship.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty,
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

The Trinity is one of our most fundamental Christian beliefs. Indeed it is so fundamental that we not only begin our service with "Holy, holy, holy" but we also close with another affirmation of it, the Benediction when I say "And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all". We believe in one God made known to us through three separate persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one in three, three in one. This doesn't always seem to make a lot of sense

though; how can God be one yet three separate persons, all at the same time?

Over the years people have come up with all sorts of explanations or analogies for the Trinity. Consider H₂O for example; in its usual state it's water but when it is cold enough it becomes ice. When it is boiled it becomes steam. We experience it in different ways but it is still H₂O. To use another analogy, we can consider human relationships. All of us play different roles in life and are known in different ways by different people but there is still only one of us. To use myself as an example, I am known as a husband, father and minister but that certainly does not mean that there are three of me! And so it is with God. Why though is this belief so important that we affirm it every Sunday and even set aside one Sunday a year to remember it?

St. Columba's followers once asked him this very same question and his response was to say that the Trinity matters because our beliefs about God matter. They matter because what we believe about God influences and even shape our behavior. If for example we believe that God is a righteous judge just waiting to smack us down when we break the rules, then that will have an impact on how we view people and life itself. If we believe that God is like a loving parent then that will have an impact on us. If we believe that God is in his heaven and has nothing to do with us, then that will be reflected in how we live our lives. In short, we need to have a full and complete knowledge of God as possible and that is what the Trinity is all about.

As the Father for example, God is the creator and the righteous one. As the Son, God has shown us how to live and ensured that we are forgiven when we fail to live the lives and be the people we should be. And as the Spirit, God is with us now, guiding us, protecting us and sharing life with us. If we take any of these away then our knowledge and experience of God is incomplete. It is not enough for example just to know that God created the world for how much does that tell us about God? Some days we might look at the creation and think how good God is yet at other times, after a natural disaster for example, we might look at the world and think

how awful God is. We also need Jesus too to both show us and tell us what the Father is like and to show us how, secure in God's love and forgiveness, we can best live our lives. Even that isn't enough though. Jesus and the Father aren't here with us and we need God here and now. In short we need the Spirit!

We may think that what we believe about God really doesn't matter nor has any relevance for our day to day lives but nothing could be further from the truth. Beliefs matter because they have a powerful, if often unrealized, impact on us. St. Columba knew this and that is why he emphasized a belief in the Trinity and, according to an ancient tradition, even invented one of Christianity's most enduring symbols for it.

The Celtic cross is a religious symbol that has long been beloved by Christians and especially by the Irish and Scots. It is certainly a beloved symbol for us Presbyterians, even rivalling the Burning Bush in popularity. What we often fail to realize though is that the Celtic cross is a visible expression or symbol of the Trinity. The cross of course represents Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection but as odd as it may seem at first there is more to Christianity than Jesus. This is why the cross also has a circle. The circle, with no beginning or end, symbolizes the oneness and eternity of God; it reminds us about the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Back in the mists of time there was a saint who at first seemed to be anything but a saint; St Columba. He was one of the first Christian missionaries to go to Scotland and so he is one of the spiritual ancestors of our own denomination. Columba firmly believed that it was not enough just to try and live a good life; what we believe about God matters too since it shapes how we live. This was true 1500 years ago and it is still true today. Indeed living in the times we do, with the present pandemic and the upheaval following the horrific death of George Floyd, we need as full a knowledge and as deep an understanding of God as possible.

