

Well, congratulations on making it through the Athanasian creed! It is technical, precise, and long, but it really is a grand statement of Christian doctrine.

We also just prayed the collect for Trinity Sunday:

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 evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

Also note that in this collect, the confession of a true faith is identified as a means of grace. And in this grace we see the glory of the Trinity leading us to worship the One True God, Three in One and One in Three.

In this prayer we also asked that God would keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from those who would attack us, presumably because of this tenet of our belief. It is difficult to maintain as dogma that which is fundamentally incomprehensible. And therefore the doctrine of the Trinity is often the point at which our faith is attacked by those who are hostile to the Church. I have watched debates with Muslims, and this is a prominent tactic that they use. In response, we must not try to rationalize what God has revealed about Himself in order to make it easier to understand. This generally leads to heresy, which I caution you to avoid! It is best simply to know the creeds and the Bible and to use that language without trying to make it comprehensible. Some things we are given to understand. Some things are shrouded in mystery. I doubt that even in the next world we will be able to grasp the fulness of God, so do not be upended by this in our current life.

Let us take a small detour here and discuss the difference between doctrine and dogma. Doctrine is an assertion of truth that comports first with Holy Scripture, and also may bring in new perspectives to encourage a deeper or fuller understanding of God. Over time, doctrines may be rejected or accepted as true, and so we have a spectrum of doctrine between that which is generally accepted and that which is merely propositional or personal and is not binding. Dogma, however, is that which is fundamental to the faith and therefore required to be believed. For us Anglicans, dogma pretty much consists of the three creeds: the Athanasian which we just read, the Nicene which we generally confess on Sundays, and the Apostle's creed which we confess during the daily offices and at baptisms as the baptismal confession. Beyond these, we do not have the same kind of authoritarian dogma that the Church of Rome has, specifying exactly what we must believe or we are not saved. The closest that we have to anything worded this strongly is the anathemas that we read at the

beginning and ending of the Athanasian creed.

Now, built into these creeds are the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Dual nature of Christ. These are not explicitly stated as such in the Bible, but are hinted at throughout, and therefore this is the basis of our assertion that these doctrines should be considered dogma for Anglicans even though we don't pronounce them as such. What do I mean by this? Well, the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, but we see the principle commonly and consistently from Genesis through Revelation.

Let's touch on a few examples. Right at the beginning of the Bible, Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Here we see God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, identified simply as God. We also see the Holy Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters. It is a little more subtle to see the second person of the Godhead, Jesus Christ, in this verse, but Christ is the Word of God, the person of the Trinity that enacts the will of the Father, so when God speaks, Christ is the Word that executes the command. So we have the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the Trinity, revealed in these first five verses of the Bible.

This is made even more explicit at the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John which reads,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

Of course this text intentionally echos the creation account of Genesis 1. Both start with the words "In the beginning." Genesis says, "In the beginning, God created." John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," and then continues, instead of with "God created", with, "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made." Just to be obvious, St. John then says, "In him was life; and the life was the LIGHT of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." Of course we read earlier that on the first day of creation, God created light and separated the light from the darkness. John says that Jesus is the

eternal Light of God. The electromagnetic energy that we know is an analogy for Christ, for it too drives away darkness.

The point here is that St. John is affirming the divinity of Christ, that Jesus Christ and God the Father are one, and thus Christ was active and present at the creation of the cosmos, and that the cosmos is a mirror for us pointing to the second person of the Godhead.

Now do we also see the Trinity in other parts of the New Testament? Most definitely. During the Epiphany season, we read of the baptism of Jesus. From the Gospel according to St. Mark chapter 1, verses 9-11:

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Again in this narrative, we see the three persons of the Trinity. Jesus Christ, the Son, the second person of the Trinity, is presented to the world by God the Father, the voice from heaven, the first person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is visualized by a dove descending upon Christ. Father, Son, and Spirit, the full Godhead, were acting in concert in Christ's ministry.

So we have clear instances of the Trinity in the beginning of the Bible and during the Incarnate ministry of Christ. But in the epistle lesson today, we also are given a picture of the Trinity in heaven. The lesson is from The Revelation to St. John of Jesus Christ beginning in the fourth chapter. First we learn that John was spiritually called up into heaven to witness what was to "be hereafter." John saw a throne upon which sat a being with glory like radiating gemstones. Around this main throne were set twenty four thrones occupied by elders dressed in white with gold crowns. Then we read that there was seven lamps of fire burning before the throne "which are the seven Spirits of God," or the seven-fold Spirit of God. Our reading this morning concludes at the end of the fourth chapter, but the narrative continues into the following chapter where we read:

And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?

And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.

And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof. And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.

So as the account continues, we are explicitly introduced to Jesus Christ as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb that had been slain, who sends the Spirit of God into all the earth. Father, Son, Spirit are revealed to us in the beginning of Creation, attested to us during Christ's earthly ministry, and here at the end of the scriptures, worshipped in heaven as in earth. Those who want to doubt the doctrine of the Trinity are sore pressed to do so in the face of these and many more supporting Biblical passages. This is why we would assert that the Trinity is more than just doctrine, but it is one of the foundational tenets of the faith. Those who disbelieve the Trinity do so at their own peril, for they have neglected the teaching of scripture, of the catholic faith, and of the Church. The question becomes, will one submit to the authority that God has given the church or will one rebel against it? A rebellious heart will not be approved before God in the day of judgement.

The other critical doctrine that we affirmed today in the Athanasian Creed is that of the dual nature of Christ, that Jesus Christ is, at the same time and in the same person, both God and man. He is the second person of the Trinity and yet He is fully human. He experienced birth, childhood, young adulthood, and full adulthood just like you or me. He experienced temptations and sorrow and hunger and work and joy and beauty just like you or me. And he experienced torture unto death, hopefully not like you or me. It is for this reason that Christ is a full representative of you and me, and that He can be a new Adam for us.

Yet the divinity of God was not brought down into Jesus' humanity. Rather, as the Athanasian Creed asserts, in Christ humanity was taken up into God. Humanity was elevated by the purity and sinlessness of Jesus, so that He is the one fit to be our Paschal Lamb. He was the man who delighted in the law of God and who loved God the Father perfectly and who loved His neighbor as Himself perfectly. Jesus, as a man, lived as Adam should have. Jesus as God ascends with our humanity to present His sacrifice before the heavenly Father.

Of course, we must ask this morning, why is this so important? Really it took the early church 200 years – basically from the time of Origen through the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. to sort out the orthodox understanding of the Trinity and of the dual nature of Christ.

The problem which caused so much difficulty in defining the orthodox understanding was that all formulations of these fundamental doctrines had to preserve the salvation of humanity by God's grace. To attack the divinity of Christ meant that He was unable to be perfect and so would have to die for his own sin. To attack the humanity of Christ meant that Jesus was no longer human and therefore could neither represent our race nor elevate our humanity to unity with God. And all the while, the early fathers of the church struggled to use primarily Biblical language and not to define new words or phrases, if possible (and it ultimately wasn't).

And after all of their work and argumentation, we all now have a perfect understanding of God! Of course this sentiment is absurd – each of us must still struggle to accept such definitions; they are not intuitively grasped, but rather they are accepted by and in faith. As we confessed this morning, “The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. ... And yet there are not three incomprehensibles, but one incomprehensible.” So if you cannot naturally comprehend God, you are in good company. After all how can the finite master the infinite? But in these mysteries, let us be assured that Christ is our true and divine representative who became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (1 Cor 5:21).

And all of this leads us to astonishment and wonder. How is it that God, Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity, should be mindful of us who have rebelled against Him? We were created in love, and we were redeemed in love, that we should likewise love both God and our fellow human beings. Therefore let us do so. And let us answer the call “Come up hither,” and let us see into the heavenly and divine mysteries. Handle and taste of these mysteries. Bow down and worship with the saints both in heaven and earth, the Lamb that was slain and now lives again, and the Father who abandoned neither the Son nor the creature, and the Seven-fold Spirit of God who is sent not only throughout the world, but also into our hearts.

Praise be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.