Between the lines: Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5: 1-5; John 16: 12-15

by Peter S. Hawkins in the May 23, 2001 issue

According to Emily Dickinson, you speak the truth best when you tell it “slant.” I am quite sure that when she penned this line the blessed Trinity was far from her thoughts. Nonetheless, her characterization of truth-telling is good to keep in mind when approaching this mysterious feast of God, the three in one and one and three. You must “tell it slant” because the direct approach simply will not work.

Yet preachers inevitably feel the need (not to mention the terrible burden) to *explain* . Men and women who normally would not be caught dead with a prop in the pulpit have been known to show up with an egg—shell, white and yoke—or an apple that is at one and the same time tree, fruit and seed. Embarrassment is palpable on all sides. If the preacher is close to his or her seminary years, he or she will likely reject such homely analogies and discuss the early church councils “responsible” for trinitarian doctrine. The more mature the ministry, however, the greater the likelihood that an aura of defeat or perhaps even absurdity will emanate from the sanctuary.

Why? Because the annual recurrence of Trinity Sunday marks the persistent attempt to make sense of an abstraction that is probably a greater stumbling block and folly than the cross. On this particular day, and without anyone wanting such a thing to happen, the mystery of God’s own self—meant to be adored in light inaccessible—becomes a puzzle to be solved, an analogy to be fetched from afar, a formulation to be improved upon.

Much of the problem has to do with the feast day itself. Unlike Easter, Pentecost, Christmas or Epiphany, Trinity Sunday has no narrative, no biblical story to ground us in space and time. (The same might be said for the other principal feast of the Christian year, All Saints, but in that case the narratives are as numerous as the blessed themselves.) As a result, the day becomes the celebration of an idea rather than what I think it was meant to be—a glimpse into God as a community of Persons.

The scriptures appointed for this day are not particularly helpful. The selection from Proverbs asks us to consider Lady Wisdom. She brings with her a feminine

dimension to God's work, but probably the last thing a preacher needs on Trinity Sunday is yet another divine "person" to contend with! Both epistle and Gospel readings give us passages that assume rather than proclaim a Triune God. Paul tells the Romans, for instance, "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." In the Gospel, Jesus comforts his disciples with the prospect of an advocate to come in his absence: "When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." In the same breath he adds, "All that the Father has is mine." These passages remind us that subsequent doctrine at Chalcedon and Nicaea has a basis in scripture. The creedal formulations, with their concern to clarify and define, grew out of a need to make sense of an experience of God as Father, Son and Spirit.

The text that takes us furthest into this Christian experience is Psalm 8—nine short verses which begin and end with the same outburst of praise over the sheer magnificence of God: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth." For the psalmist, of course, God's name is unspeakable, off limits, as incendiary as a burning bush and as dangerous as an eruption on Sinai. Given this, what can one do but praise the divine glory that surpasses moon and stars, and do so with skills of articulation that finally are no more astute than the babble that pours forth out of "the mouths of babes and infants"? No matter that we have been made a little lower than the angels, crowned by God with glory and honor. We still cannot say more in the end than what we said at the beginning of the psalm, "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

Perhaps poets can serve the Trinity best because they know that truth can at best be told at a slant, between the lines, beyond where words themselves can go. Take Dante. In the final canto of the *Commedia* he brings the reader into the presence of God. Bathed in light, he first sees absolutely everything in the universe coming together within a book whose gathered pages are bound together by love. In the twinkling of an eye he sees that first vision become another: three circles of identical dimension make an appearance but each with its own distinctive color—an image of unity and diversity. Finally, he notices that the central of the three circles is painted with *la nostra effige*, our human image and likeness.

What to make of this pictorial presentation of the incarnate Christ with a face like ours, at the heart of the Triune God? How to understand how uncreated light could possibly incorporate our finite, contingent flesh? The poet finds himself in the place of the geometer desperate to square the circle, or of the theologian intent on nailing

down two natures in one person and three persons in one God. Try as he may, he finds the road blocked. All he can do is allow himself to be swept away by the overwhelming presence of God, caught up in the love that moves the sun and the other stars.