

Athanasian Creed  
Trinity Sunday  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
May 26, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

There are two great doctrines, or teachings of the Christian faith, two teachings that set Christianity apart from every other world religion: the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation. Trinity is the term we use to describe the one true God as He is within Himself and as He reveals Himself to us: one God, yet three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You can hear it in the word itself: Trinity—tri-unity. Three and yet one. A threefold oneness or a singular threeness, depending on which way your mind is coming at it.

The Trinity is the greatest mystery of our faith, a mystery God reveals to us in the Scriptures, but a mystery we can't really wrap our tiny minds around. The second greatest mystery is related to the doctrine of the Trinity. It's the doctrine of the incarnation, the fact that one of the persons of the Trinity, God the Son, came into the flesh—in-carnation—into the flesh to live for us, to die on the cross for us, and to rise again from the dead, ascend into Heaven, and one day return to judge the living and the dead. In Jesus Christ, the divine and human natures are united to each other similar to how body and soul are united. This is a mystery. We know it's true based on the Word of God, yet we can't wrap our minds around the fact that Jesus is both God and man. These two great mysteries of the Christian faith revealed to us in the Scriptures—the Trinity and the Incarnation—are the pillars upon which our faith is built. Without the doctrine of the Trinity and without the doctrine of the Incarnation, the entire Christian system collapses. All other beliefs hinge on these two doctrines.

That's why we celebrate Trinity Sunday. We worship the Triune God and we worship the God-man, Jesus Christ, everyday of our lives, but on Trinity Sunday we take time to focus on the significance of these teachings. It's kind of like how we honor our father and mother everyday, but we still set apart Mother's Day and Father's Day as unique. Or how we are thankful for those who have served in the armed forces of our respective countries, or those who have given their lives in sacrifice for our nations, but we still set apart days of remembrance like Veterans Day, Memorial Day or Volkstrauertag. Today, on Trinity Sunday, as we transition to the second half of the Church year, we focus on our Triune God and on the fact that the second person of the Trinity took on our human nature to redeem it.

Of course, Trinity Sunday has its own traditions, as does every festival, whether secular or religious. The most prominent tradition on this day is our confession of the Athanasian Creed. It's become standard for the Christian to confess the Apostle's Creed, the baptismal creed, everyday, as the Small Catechism directs us. Every Divine Service, or Communion Service, includes the Nicene Creed as the Church's confession. But on Trinity Sunday, we confess the Athanasian Creed. The teachings are rightly attributed to St. Athanasius, a priest living in Egypt in the 300s. Athanasius defended the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation against the arch heretic Arius. For defending the truth, Athanasius was exiled to the city of Trier for two years. That was the first of five exiles for this great church father.

The teachings and the language of the Athanasian Creed are attributed to Athanasius. But the formulation of this creed itself goes back to Spain in the early Middle Ages. Germanic tribes were invading and bringing with them a perversion of Christianity—Arianism—which denied the Trinity and the full divinity of Jesus Christ. The Athanasian Creed, like all creeds and confessions, became a defense against the false doctrines that were becoming prevalent. From

the 8th century and in some places even earlier, until the year 1954, this creed was part of the early Sunday morning service before the Divine Service. Now we normally confess the Athanasian Creed only once per year, on Trinity Sunday.

“Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally.” The Athanasian Creed then goes on to confess the catholic faith as worshipping the Triune God and believing the incarnation of our LORD Jesus Christ, the Trinity and the Incarnation, the two pillars of our Christian faith. Modern Christians and especially modern Protestants can have a difficult time with the Athanasian Creed on account of some of the language used and the harshness of tone. But as we’ll see, the Athanasian Creed, like all true confessions, simply restates teachings we find throughout the Scriptures. And as Christians, we can’t avoid speaking the way the Scriptures speak, even if it sounds harsh.

“Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith.” The term “catholic faith” can be confusing for people. The Greek word “catholic” simply means “universal.” Don’t confuse it with the modern denomination, the Roman Catholic Church. They use the word “catholic” in their name, and you often hear the word “catholic” as shorthand for “Roman Catholic.” But the term “catholic” itself just means universal. The catholic faith is the faith held everywhere, at all times, and by all. That means that as Lutherans, you are catholics. You hold to the basics of the Christian faith as they have always been taught, everywhere, and by all. You hold to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In fact, if you look in the hymnal at the footnotes to the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, you’ll see a reference to the word “Christian.” “I believe in the holy Christian church.” The footnote says that “the ancient text reads ‘catholic,’ meaning the whole Church as it confesses the wholeness of Christian doctrine.” So today we

often translate the word “catholic” as “Christian.” Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the Christian faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally.

The Athanasian Creed continues by emphasizing that as Christians, we worship the true God who is one and yet three, three and yet one. We neither confuse the persons nor divide the substance. Each person of the Triune God is distinct: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet in a mysterious way all three persons are one God, always working together in creation, redemption, and sanctification.

“Whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity. But it is also necessary for everlasting salvation that one faithfully believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” When people confess this, they might wonder: “But I thought you just had to believe in Jesus to be saved. Why would you need to hold to this doctrine of the Trinity for your salvation? And to this doctrine of the Incarnation as such? Is this not adding something to Scripture or making salvation conditional on some academic formulation?” Those are the initial thoughts modern Christians often have when confronted with the Athanasian Creed.

The Apostle Paul says: “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). The Christian faith is a confession. It’s something that is believed and then spoken. If you truly believe Jesus is Lord then you believe that this man, Jesus, is also God—true God and yet true man at the same time. But what does it mean to confess that Jesus is God? To confess that Jesus is God, you have to know who the true God is. He is the God of the Old Testament, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Almighty, the Eternal one, the one to whom the seraphim worship with their threefold “Holy, Holy, Holy.” He is the God who puts His threefold blessing upon the people: the LORD

bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you, the Lord lift up His countenance upon you.” Jesus teaches throughout His earthly ministry about His Father, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. That’s what we’ve seen in the Gospel of John since Easter. Jesus says: “Whoever hates me hates my Father also.” “They have not known the Father, nor me.” “I am going to Him who sent me.” Jesus says: “I and the Father are one.” Jesus also says He will send the Helper, the Spirit of truth, “who proceeds from the Father.” And He will bear witness about Jesus. And then in the great commission, Jesus commands His disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three persons yet one God. To “believe in Jesus,” to confess that Jesus is God, is to confess Him as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who took on our human nature to die and rise for our forgiveness.

Jesus is the one true God. He shares His divinity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But His humanity He shares with us. After the Trinity, the Incarnation is the most fundamental doctrine of our Christian faith. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity took on our human nature. He assumed, or put on, our humanity in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Why? That He might lay down His life as the sacrificial victim for our sins. God had to become man in order to reconcile man to God. God needed a body that could be beaten and bruised, nailed to the cross for you. God needed blood to spill on your behalf. He needed a physical body and blood to offer His life and to feed you who are physical with His physical body and blood unto everlasting life. Without the shedding of blood, there’s no purification. Without the shedding of God’s blood, there’s no forgiveness of sins. One of the Holy Trinity needed to take on our human nature to redeem human nature from sin. The Trinity and the Incarnation always belong together in the Christian faith and everything we believe is anchored on these two doctrines.

As body and soul are one man, so God and man are one in Jesus Christ, who suffered, died, rose again from the dead, and will return to judge the living and the dead. This last part of the Athanasian Creed is another place people might stumble. All people will rise again from the dead bodily and give an account concerning their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter into eternal life and those who have done evil into eternal fire. “But what about the Gospel? What about saved by grace alone through faith alone, without works?” That’s how our inner Protestant has taught us to think. But this language is entirely scriptural. In Matthew 25, Jesus says that when He returns, He will separate the sheep from the goats, the believers from the unbelievers. Both believers and unbelievers will be judged by what they do. Believers will be judged by the fruits of the faith God has worked in them. Unbelievers will be judged by the wicked fruit that grows out of their sinful hearts. Only true believers, those who have been brought to faith and accounted righteous by God’s grace on account of Christ, can do truly good works; these good works are the evidence and manifestation of the faith in their hearts.

This, then, is our catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and finally cannot be saved. This is the universal, Christian faith. God is One, yet three. He is three, yet one. And one of the persons of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God from eternity, became man, born of the Virgin Mary in time. He was sent by God the Father to take on our human nature, to redeem us from sin by dying on the cross and then rising again from the dead. And from the Father and the Son proceeds the Holy Spirit, who creates this faith in our hearts, leading us to the Son and in the Son to the Father. May the Holy Spirit preserve you in this faith and give you abundant fruit unto life everlasting. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.