

Trinity Sunday & the Church Calendar

Ever since the 12th century, the Sunday after Pentecost has been set aside to commemorate and celebrate the doctrine of the Trinity. Thomas Beckett's first act as Archbishop of Canterbury was to set aside the day of his installation as a feast celebrating the Holy Trinity, and "Trinity Sunday" has been included in the liturgical calendar of virtually every Christian tradition ever since. Many traditions take the opportunity to recite the Athanasian Creed, which is one of the church's most elaborate statements regarding this central doctrine.

The doctrine of the Trinity seems like something that could be commemorated at any time of the year, but the Sunday after Pentecost is a fitting opportunity to focus on and celebrate the foundational doctrine of the Christian faith. The church year actually begins in late November or early December with the season of Advent (four weeks). The season of Christmastide (12 days) follows, and transitions into the season of Epiphany. Epiphany goes from Jan. 5 until Shrove Tuesday, which transitions into the forty days of Lent. Passion Week marks the transition from Lent to Easter, the 50 days that include the Ascension and culminate with Pentecost. This first half of the church calendar (December thru May) focuses on the work of Jesus. It is in and through the life of Jesus that we come to know God most fully and learn what God is really like. Jesus opens up the life of the Trinity to us and welcomes us in.

Following the "dominical cycle" of the church year (the part focused on Jesus' life), Trinity Sunday serves as a transition point into "ordinary time" or "the season after Pentecost". The first half of the year focuses on God's work in Christ, and the second half of the year (June thru November) focuses on God's work in and through the Church. Jesus is in heaven, but His Spirit-anointed body, the Church, manifests the presence of Jesus in the world. Just as Jesus was baptized by the Spirit for His ministry, Jesus has given us the Spirit to equip us to continue His mission. The Spirit of God is still at work in the world, and the Church is His primary base of operation. The Spirit can work anywhere He pleases, but He has promised to work in the context of the church's worship, fellowship, and service. Likewise, God can work out His plans in any way He chooses, but the Church will always be the focal point of God's activity in the world. It is the doctrine of the Trinity that makes salvation possible, and it is the doctrine of the Trinity that undergirds and shapes the life and mission of the Church.