Sermon on The Feast of the Holy Trinity
(Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15)

It happens sometimes that a father or a mother knows they’re going to die at a fairly young age; sometimes they leave their children letters to be opened at certain times in their lives, e.g. when they go off to High School, when they have their first kiss, when they get their first job or meet the love of their lives.

These stories—if you google this, you’ll find stories like this that are obviously fake, but also genuine instances written up in respectable newspapers and magazines—are touching but they also reveal wisdom.

Wisdom because there’s a right time to have certain conversations. No point talking about dating until those hormones begin to course through a young person’s body; no point talking about investing for your future when you’re not even old enough to receive an allowance!

So when Jesus says in John’s Gospel “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” he’s not trying to be dramatic on the eve of his death, he’s not trying to be coy; he’s being wise.

As John testifies, the Church could not, cannot, understand certain truths about God and human destiny prior to Christ’s Resurrection, prior to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is only in light of these experiences that we can possibly begin to journey with these “many things” that Jesus still has to say to us and the world.

By analogy, it is certainly has been true for me, and in my experience of talking with people about the spiritual life over a number of years now, that each person is ready to take further steps on the spiritual journey only once they have experienced certain things whether those be good or bad.

So, for instance, it is difficult to understand the role of suffering in our lives until we have suffered; it is impossible to practice forgiveness in any meaningful way until we’ve been truly hurt by someone.

As some of you may know I’m privileged to be the informal chaplain of a group of parents whose children have come out to them as queer. You might wonder why they require support; it’s because they’re all members of conservative churches and the teaching they’ve been exposed to has often condemned queer people to Hell.

But this new experience of someone they love dearly coming out to them has been their spur for a fresh examination of the scriptures, more importantly, the fresh possibility of understanding love as the fulfillment of the law.

There is a conception of God that is tied to all that I’ve just said and it is the word Trinity. A word that is itself the fruit of a long journey of discovery as Christian thinkers and ordinary Christians thought about the world, thought about the scriptures and experienced the presence of God in their prayers, in the beauty and the horrors of the world and in their relationships.

It is a word that seeks to make sense of Jesus and the central conviction that arose after his Resurrection that somehow this man who had touched them physically, who had washed their feet, had cried out to God in anguish as blood poured from his wounds was the Lord, the honorific title reserved till that time in all Judaism for the unnameable source and creator of all.

Take a look at the Celtic Cross in your bulletin.

Unlike the bare cross that feature in so many Protestant Churches, including this one, Celtic Crosses as they developed in Northern England and Scotland during the Middle Ages are replete with symbols of the Trinity.

We notice around the cross a circle, a circle with something like vines intertwined within the confines of the circle. The circle or ring is found across cultures and religions in the ancient world as a symbol of divinity, there is no “end-point” to a circle.

Perfection in the ancient world was associated with the celestial spheres unchanging, divine in their unchanging motions and through their ability to provide the conditions for life, growth and all that was associated with flourishing.

It was in Israel that the conviction grew that divinity was not many spheres but One unseen reality, and that this One God was manifested in the Wisdom that called out “to all that live” as our reading says.

The book of Proverbs uniquely calls our attention to the Created Order and to its unseen Creator and then insists that all who desire to live, must live in step with created order and from the Creator’s Wisdom.

This awesome wisdom is available to all in the course of ordinary living, as our reading puts it “on the heights,” in our flourishing and successes, also “beside the way”, that is, as we do ordinary things, and then “at the crossroads she takes her stand,” within the thick texture of decision-making that makes up human living and human relationships.

And so Proverbs orients us to the Wisdom of the One Eternal Divinity that calls out to all creatures: Follow my ways in all your comings and goings and you’ll live, really live!

But you’ll notice, looking back at our Celtic Cross that the One Circle, full of creative power and growth potential encircles the center of the cross.

Here we begin to experience some counter-intuition, some sense “Dorothy, we’re not in Kansas anymore!” Some sense that the Christian conception of God, however much it shares with the other monotheistic religions also encloses, takes in, embraces even, the tragic nature of Creation and of human life.

Indeed, of the many things Jesus still wants to say to all who claim to be his followers, the message about the centrality of the Cross is the strangest, most counter-intuitive and yet the word without which there is no “Christian conception of God,” certainly no Trinity.

We desperately want Jesus just to be a great wise teacher, maybe after the model given to us in Proverbs, someone everyone can relate to: a model of self-help love who becomes the source of tolerance: including within his followers women, others labeled notorious sinners and just plain ordinary folk.

And he was those things; but the “Jesus difference” what sets him apart from other wise women and men is the testimony that in his death God revealed the divine nature not separately from the horrors of suffering but essentially one with them!

Christians will talk about what the Cross accomplished, how it defeats evil, sin and death. But maybe just as importantly what the Cross reveals is that God is not just the Wise Rejoicing Creator, but the Suffering God, the One who has, is and will suffer with all of Creation.

Why? Because Creation isn’t finished. What is being forged through the billions of years of creation, the billions of years of development and evolution is matter becoming what God is.

It is only in this way that something that is outside of God can experience what and who God is! By becoming the One who Suffers in Christ, God is able to enfold our own suffering so that our suffering becomes not the end, but that from which life can still come whether in this life or the next.

And so within the cross we also see spirals; spirals are a sign of movement and journey. In the Cross God joins our journey towards living well and towards a Life that can enfold all that life throws at us.

This is why Paul can juxtapose two phrases that seem the very opposite of what would be possible: “we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings…”

It’s not that God asks us to look for suffering but just the fact that when we suffer we are not abandoned, we are not outside the will of God but precisely at peace with the one who suffers alongside us.

That this is an ongoing reality in God and in us is symbolized on the Celtic Cross by the Dove, the Dove is the sign of peace given to Noah when he was searching for land after the flood, the symbol of the Holy Spirit that descends on Jesus at his Baptism when he hears the Voice, the voice that says “you are my well beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.”

Notice that on the Cross the Dove, the Holy Spirit descends to the chalice, and we’ve come full circle, God’s divinity revealed to us in the ordinary as Proverbs teaches but now through a knowledge that God has fully embraced us, including our weakness and suffering.

It was at the last Supper, cup in hand, that Jesus said “I have still many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now.” Now in light of the Resurrection we come with renewed hope to this table, understanding a bit more but still on a journey.

God with us, seeking to persuade us to join the Divine life because God has joined ours: The Trinity.