

“Speaking of God”

2 Corinthians 13: 11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

Help us O God in our attempt to understand you and to articulate what we believe. Amen.

Last Thursday (May 15), a news item grabs the attention of the world. It is about an auction in London of a letter that was sold for 170,000 pounds. The letter was written on January 3, 1954 by Albert Einstein, the famous Nobel Prize winner in Physics to Eric Gutkind who sent him a copy of his book “Choose Life: The Biblical Call to Revolt”. This is what he wrote in one section of that letter, *“The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable, but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can (for me) change this.”* (The Guardian) How I wish he was still alive and expound more about his thoughts. But many feasts and rejoices that one of the greatest and brilliant minds in our century considers faith in God an “expression and product of human weakness.”

God is a very important word in fact central to our affirmation as Christians and to all who consider themselves people of faith. There may be different understanding of God but if you take God away from our vocabulary, the Christian faith makes no sense at all.

Today is Trinity Sunday and the Church highlights the doctrine of God. During the Lenten season we hear extensively Jesus story the second person of the Trinity. On Pentecost, we ponder upon the Holy Spirit and today, we speak about God whom our text referred to as Father.

The word trinity is not in the Bible. It was introduced by Tertullian, one of the early fathers who use it to explain the concept of “one God in three persons.” But the idea of God that we are familiar with was present in the early writings of Paul in Corinthians and in the gospel of Matthew. We always hear the benediction - *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,*

and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. (2 Corinthians 13:13) or the name upon which all of us were baptized – “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28: 19b).

“One God in three persons” refers to a common practice in the Greek drama where an actor can play different roles or different persona by using several masks. The imagery was understood clearly by people who live on that period and the church used trinity as a way to explain our faith in one God in three persons as outlined in the early creeds. Many books in the past were written in an attempt to explain God. But there are some things that we should remember when we speak about God.

In the Jewish tradition, the word God is so sacred that one is not even allowed to pronounce God. The letters YHWH upon which the vowels A & E were added by some so that it can be read as YAHWEH is actually a word that cannot even be read at all.

The whole concept points to the idea that God is beyond us. There are limits to human language that all our words are always inadequate to fully capture the fullness of God. For any God that can be explained is no God at all. There is always that sense of mystery that separates us creatures from our Creator. Think about it – how can God who is beyond time and space be described in words that makes sense only within this framework. That is why the language describing God is cast in metaphors and poetry and even music and art because there is something so deep in God that always escape our attempt to explain God in satisfactory manner.

It is for this reason that the Christian affirmation of God becoming human in Jesus is very important. God’s love and grace is so great that God took the initiative to reach out to us because we ourselves cannot reach out to God in our own way. Jesus is God reaching out to us so that we will have a ‘point of reference’ in our own human framework when we speak of God.

Today Jesus is not with us in body but Christians after the Pentecost speaks about God’s presence through the Spirit. When Christians speaks about God as Father or Creator, God as Son in

Jesus Christ and God as present in Holy Spirit – we are not talking about three different beings but we speak about one God experienced in three different ways.

St. Augustine has its own way of explaining Trinity, it is called as the seven statements about God: *The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. The Son is not the Father. The Father is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Son. And then, after these six statements, Augustine adds one more. There is only one God.*

Every generation of believers have to labor patiently to express our understanding of God based on the Biblical witness and also based on the best possible way that people in our time can relate to. Although the task is impossible but it is doable as what believers before us did during their lifetime. What is important to remember is that there is no fix formula to explain everything and we should be humble enough to admit our limits and most importantly to listen to others whose experience of the divine can shed light to our own experience of God.

But as Christians, One God in Three Persons is our starting point. The God whom we know and experience as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – this is where we start our conversation with those who wish to listen and to engage us not in a debate but in a sharing how we encounter God in the here and now.

Another area that we need to give due consideration in our context is the challenge or the issue of gender when we speak about God. This is something new. The writers of the creeds in the early church were not confronted with this issue.

Now people within and outside the church ask, is God male or female? Definitely God is not like us – God is neither male nor female. Jesus however is a man. He is called the son and not the daughter of Mary. The Holy Spirit is not male or female either, much more the Spirit should not be referred to as “it.” –
In this sense, I strongly agree that we can sincerely use female attributes or imagery in describing God not for the sake of making

even because for sometime the church pray using the phrase God as Father. We can use female attributes because it is truthful and appropriate as part of our experience of God. Can you not imagine God who acts like a mother who cares and shelters her children just as we embrace the idea of old that the Father is the sole provider of the needs of the family? I said the idea of old because today there are families where the mother is the sole provider. A lot of Filipino mothers work abroad so that family needs can be provided. It is true even with some of us here in the church. Jesus like the rest of the Jewish community during his lifetime use the word Father because it describes best the attributes of God that they wanted to convey – the God among others, “who gives them and us our daily bread” as Jesus taught in his prayer.

But when this gender issue is push to a point that each group insists that whenever a male image is used there should be a female counter part or vice versa because failure to do so is not being gender sensitive – this I also strongly disagree. When we speak of God in reverence we are not involved in a contest, much more we should not use God as the playing field of ideological battle.

If one use a female-like attribute of God in prayer or in giving testimony then do it freely without feeling the need to apologize or to feel the need to put a balance. Same is true when we speak of God using the male-like attributes. What is important is to remember that God is not male or female. And part of our attempt to enlarge our vocabulary about God, all of us are challenge to open ourselves and embrace in the right spirit imagery or words or metaphors about God beyond the familiar ones that what we usually used. But whenever we use one that is not conventional, use words thoughtfully and also with a sense of sensitivity bearing in mind that the ultimate purpose of our language is to help those who listen to us connect the gap between what is human and what is divine.

Finally, I also challenge you to pause and ponder about the God you believe when you were a child and the God you believe today? During the Confirmation Class one of the exercises our kids went through is to examine different kinds of prayer. How would you feel if you pray the same kind of prayer when you were 5 until 55

or 65 or 75? Maturity of faith also implies a deeper understanding of God. Marcus Borg puts the question in this manner: What is the character of your God? Is your God:

- . Primarily concerned about personal virtue?
- . Primarily a lawgiver and judge, somebody you need to measure up?
- . A God of requirements and rewards?
- . Primarily a God of heaven and hell?
- . Primarily a national God
- . Mostly “nice”
- . Mostly indifferent?
- . A God of compassion
- . A God of social justice

He then added; “it makes a difference how we see the character of God, for how we see God shapes our sense of what faithfulness to God means and thus what the Christian life is about.” (The Heart of Christianity, 2004 page 74).

Einstein considered those who believe in God as weak. Maybe it depends on what kind of God one believes. I don't believe that Martin Luther King, Jr. was weak when he leads this nation to open up its eyes and to be true to her conviction as inscribed in the Declaration of Independence that “that all men are created equal.” Martin Luther King Jr. believes in the Triune God – the God as testified in the Bible and the same God whom we believe and serve.

I don't believe that Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa is weak, he who confronted the armed security police on his Cathedral while Nelson Mandela was still in prison when they fought against the Apartheid movement. He also believe in God testified in the Bible and the same God whom we believe and serve.

I don't believe that the Amish community is weak – they who lost their children when someone murdered in cold bold the innocent boys and girls in their classroom yet in the spirit of forgiveness embrace the killer's family in love as they bury their dead. They

also believe in God testified in the Bible and the same God whom we believe and serve.

I don't believe that Filipinos who put their lives in front of the tanks sent by President Marcos to disperse people power in 1986 were weak. They also believe in God testified in the Bible and the same God whom we believe and serve.

I don't believe that countless women and men are weak – they who served in various capacity as teachers, missionaries, pastors, priests, nuns, doctors, nurses, engineers and many others they who work in non-government organizations – they who go into the world and preach the gospel in word and in deed, they whose lifestyle reflects utmost simplicity in sharp contrast with those who wantonly display luxury as God's blessing in the midst of poverty. They also believe in God testified in the Bible and the same God whom we believe and serve.

It is indeed worthwhile to examine the God whom we believe. For faith in God requires a response from those who say I believe. Not a conditional response but a passionate response. For a God that deserves a half-hearted response is no God at all. Not the God who created us but a God of our own making.

Today, we join the rest of those who say I believe in God, Creator of heaven and earth, I believe in Jesus Christ, born of Mary who died and live again, I believe in the Holy Spirit God present with us now and always. It's time to wake up and do our own attempt to explore courageously who God is and attempt to the best of our ability to put a handle on our faith so that we can share what we passionately believe to others. This is an exciting task and it is also humbling. But the Bible had this promise – the Holy Spirit will be with us to teach us and to guide us, God will be with us until the end of the world. Go and explore, explore boldly. Amen.

Trinity Sunday
May 18, 2008

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May 18, 2008 – 1:30 P.M.

Preacher: Rev. Reuben D. Cedino
Sermon: "*Speaking of God*"

SCRIPTURE READING:
Epistle: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20

Anthem: "One Thing I Ask of the Lord"
Fil-Am UCC Choir

Liturgist: Mr. Art Taclob
Pianist: Ms. Jean Nabong
Music Team: Alfa Garcia - guitar,
Faye Garcia - vocals, Jansen Tubo – bass
Noel Rivera - guitar, piano
Organist and Choral Director: Ms. Rachel A. Dadap

Ms. Eva Tubo, *Elder-in-Charge*
Ms. Emily T. Villalba, *Steward-in-Charge*
Dr. Romy Dagdayan, *Trustee-in-Charge*
Dr. & Ms. Romy & Prossy Dagdayan, *Ushers*
Mr. & Ms. Boy & Eva Tubo, *Floral Offering*