

Most Holy Trinity Sunday – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

It would seem that on this particular Sunday the Church would tell us all about the inner workings of the Blessed Trinity. Today would be the prime time for answering such questions as:

- How can one God be three Persons, and three Persons be one God?
- Why three Persons instead of three forces, or three ideas, or three concepts?
- Why only three instead of four, or six or a dozen?
- How does the Trinity work together? Does the Father have veto power?
- How does Jesus' humanity fit into the Trinity?
- Why didn't the Father and the Holy Spirit become flesh like the Son and dwell among us?

The doctrine of the Trinity describes the unique ways that we experience God's presence in our lives. It is a confusing doctrine, even for adults, because it seems to imply three gods who are yet One God. When we speak of the mystery of creator and creation, we can only apprehend that mystery by analogy, poetry, and symbolic language. What we describe with the doctrine of the Trinity is an experience of God.

First, we know God through His creation and through our own creative acts. When we make something, whether it be a piece of furniture or a special meal, we are in touch with God as we shape something into a different form. The intense fulfillment of childbirth is another example of creative time. When we are creative, we feel whole and fulfilled. God is creating through us, and we have a sense of being an instrument for the Divine. We call this way of experiencing God "Father".

Secondly, we know God in the sense expressed in 1 John 4:16 "God is love, and He who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." God is as close to us as the healing love that is shared among His people. It was Jesus who proclaimed this reality by the power of love He showed in His life, death, and resurrection. Using the metaphors of biblical language, we could say that we "meet Christ" in the acts of love and healing. We know God through the "flesh and blood" of His presence in our lives and through the power of love that leads us into deeper life. We call this way of experiencing and knowing God "Son", since Jesus is called the Son of God.

Finally, we feel the spirit and are "turned on" to God's power. We know God through the inspiration that comes to us. Our secular use of the word "spirit" describes very well the experiences of God we feel through spiritedness and inspiration. When I say that certain

words “came to me” in a moment of crisis, I feel I am describing the experience of receiving inspiration. As Christians we simply add the word “Holy” to the everyday word “Spirit” to define the spirited way of knowing God in our lives. Thus we can say that we know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The dogma of the Trinity has not always been clearly defined. In fact, the word “trinity” does not appear in Holy Scripture (neither does the word “pope”, “purgatory”, or “catholic” for that matter – as our fundamentalist brothers and sisters will be quick to point out). It is not even clear how the doctrine was understood in the time of the apostles. The oldest doctrinal formulation of the Church’s belief in the Trinity is in the Apostle’s Creed, which, in the form of the ancient Roman baptismal symbol, served as the basis of catechumenical instruction and as a baptismal confession of faith since the second century.

In the early Church, Christians began to ponder the mystery of God’s unity and the Trinity and attempted to explain more precisely the relationships among the persons of the Trinity. These efforts led to many errors in the early years, and most of those who tried to describe the relationships ended in heresy. Even the great theologians Tertullian and Origin stumbled into error in their attempts to explain the relationship between the Father and the Son. Arius, around the year A.D. 300, concluded that the Word (logos) of God was created by the Father to be the instrument of all other creation. The Word, or God the Son, was a perfect creature to Arius, but a creature nonetheless. Were this account true, then only the Father would be truly God, and the Son and Holy Spirit would then be divine only through adoption by the Father. In such a case, the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity would become merely a descending hierarchy with the Father extending His grace to the Son and the Holy Spirit, rather than a communion of co-equal and co-eternal persons, who together are the one, true God. Arianism finally died out almost 500 years later at the end of the 7th century. Arianism has been revived in the modern world by the Jehovah’s Witnesses who deny that Jesus is God.

The creed which we call the Nicene Creed originated at the Council of Nicea in AD 325. It was probably introduced into the western liturgy by the regional Council of Toledo in A.D. 589. That text however, was a Latin translation of the Greek original and came to include a small addition which resulted in major theological disputes, namely that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father and the Son, rather than only from the Father. This matter continues to divide Catholic and Protestant Christians from Eastern Orthodox Christians.

1st Reading -Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40

On the plains of Moab, God charges Moses, now close to death, once more to proclaim the Law which he received through the revelation at Mount Sinai. This proclamation is contained in the fifth and last book of the Pentateuch, which is called in the Greek Septuagint *deuteronomion*, or second law.

Moses is addressing a new generation of Israelites, survivors of the Baal of Peor

incident where the men of Israel had indulged in sexual immorality with Moabite women and had bowed down and sacrificed before their gods (baals). As a result of this incident a plague was unleashed against the Israelites which was stopped only when Phineas, grandson of Aaron, thrust his spear through an Israelite man and his Moabite concubine. Twenty-four thousand died in the plague. It was at this point that the line of the priesthood passed from the Levites to the line of Phineas (Numbers 25:13).

The words of the covenant in Deuteronomy are more lax than the words given at Mount Sinai, Moses makes accommodation for their sinfulness. For example, it is in Deuteronomy where we hear this divorce is allowed – otherwise the man would have killed his wife in order to be free to remarry.

[Moses said to the people:] ³² “Ask now of the days of old, before your time, ever since God created man upon the earth; ask from one end of the sky to the other: Did anything so great ever happen before? Was it ever heard of? ³³ Did a people ever hear the voice of God speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live?

This is a reference to when the Israelites heard God’s thunder at Mount Sinai while Moses was on the mountain. One cannot see God and live (Exodus 33:20).

³⁴ Or did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, with his strong hand and outstretched arm, and by great terrors, all of which the LORD, your God, did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

A reference to the Exodus, the ten plagues which preceded it, and the many signs performed in the desert.

³⁹ This is why you must now know, and fix in your heart, that the LORD is God in the heavens above and on earth below, and that there is no other.

In preparation for the entering of Canaan, the promised land, the people must realize that Yahweh has superseded the gods of the heavens and the underworld of Canaan and the surrounding nations.

⁴⁰ You must keep his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you today, that you and your children after you may prosper, and that you may have long life on the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you forever.”

Being good, obeying the commandments of the Law of God, brings life. This was initially understood as longevity; whereas sin often brought with it misfortune or death as a punishment from God (see Ezekiel 18:10-13, 19-20). The fact that God is just in His treatment of man, rewarding him or punishing him, sooner or later, for the good or evil which he does, is a message that runs through both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament the emphasis is on reward or punishment in this present life on earth; in the New Testament more emphasis is put on divine retribution in the future life in heaven.

2nd Reading - Romans 8:14-17

Today we hear Saint Paul tell us that it is through the Spirit that the Christian becomes a child of God, destined for glory.

14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

The Spirit animates and activates the Christian and makes one a child of God.

“If you put your confidence in baptism to the point that you neglect your behavior after it, Paul says that, even if you are baptized, if you are not led by the Spirit afterward you will lose the dignity bestowed on you and the honor of your adoption. This is why he does not talk about those who received the Spirit in the past but rather about those who are being led by the Spirit now.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans*, 14].

15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,

Saint Paul is playing on the meanings of *pneuma* (Greek) which is translated as “spirit.” Christians have received the “Spirit of God” – this is not a “spirit” in the sense of a disposition or mentality that a slave would have. Vitalized and filled by God’s Spirit, the Christian cannot possess the attitude of a slave, because he is free.

but you received a spirit of adoption,

Not a legal adoption as such, but God, through baptism (of water and spirit) has taken the Christian into His family where he (the Christian) has the status of a child rather than of a slave (who indeed belonged to the household but had no “family” rights or inheritance. Since the sin of the golden calf, the Jews were slaves of God.

through which we cry, “Abba, Father!”

My father

“We have received the Spirit to enable us to know the one to whom we pray, our real Father, the one and only Father of all, that is, the one who like a Father educates us for salvation and does away with fear.” [Saint Clement of Alexandria (post A.D. 202), *Stromateis*, 2.78].

16 The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

The Spirit makes the Christian aware of his adoptive sonship.

“The Spirit of adoption ... bears witness and assures our spirits that we are children of God

after we have passed from the spirit of slavery and come under the Spirit of adoption, when all fear has departed. We no longer act out of fear of punishment but do everything out of love for the Father. It is right too that the Spirit of God should be said to bear witness with our spirits and not with our souls, because the spirit is our better part.” [Origin (post A.D. 244), *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*].

17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God

Not only are we admitted into God’s family, but God’s gratuitous gift gives us the right to inherit the Father’s estate (heaven and its rewards).

and joint heirs with Christ,

Jesus, the true son, has already received the Father’s estate (glory) and we are destined also to share it with Him.

if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Notice the connection explicitly asserted between Jesus’ passion and His resurrection. We, as heirs, must walk in His footsteps. Suffering forms our conscience and perfects us.

“Here ‘suffer with him’ does not mean that we should sympathize and come to the aid of the sufferer, as it usually does in everyday parlance. Christ did not suffer in order to get attention, nor did He undergo weakness in order to gain the sympathy of those who felt sorry for Him. To suffer with Christ means to endure the same sufferings that He was forced to suffer by the Jews because He preached the gospel. ... If we suffer with Him we shall be worthy to be glorified with Him as well. This glory is the reward of our sufferings and is not to be regarded as a free gift. The free gift is that we have received remission of our former sins.” [Diodore of Tarsus (ca. A.D. 345), *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*].

Gospel - Matthew 28:16-20

Our gospel reading for today is the last five verses of the Gospel of Matthew; the five verses which Protestant Bibles call “The Great Commission.” It is Jesus’ second resurrection appearance in this gospel, the first having been to the women who had come to the tomb.

16 The eleven disciples went to Galilee,

This alludes to the absence of Judas who, we are told in Matthew 27:5, had hanged himself.

to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.

The identity of the mountain is unknown, like the mount of the transfiguration.

17 When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted.

Although they recognize Him immediately, the stress is not on His appearance but on His words.

18 Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Note the past tense. It is God the Father who has bestowed divine authority on Jesus as the Son of Man. He is the ambassador of the Father with full authority to make commitments and obligations. The authority is that of the Kingdom of God.

19 Go, therefore,

Because He has full authority, He can commission others to work in His behalf.

and make disciples of all nations,

The great commission is a general command: to “make disciples of all nations” – all people of all cultures – even Jews who are not already disciples.

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit,

Now we learn how they are to make disciples – first they baptize them, which is a rite of initiation. By being baptized “in the name” signifies that they belong to the one triune God. By belonging to the Name, they owe allegiance to the one God and all He represents and manifests.

20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

After being baptized and having received the Holy Spirit, the initiates are to be instructed in all the doctrines. In the early Church, the Eucharist was not explained until after baptism.

And behold, I am with you always,

Jesus is Emmanuel, the divine presence (*Shekinah*) with His people as they make decisions, study, pray, preach, baptize and teach. He is with us because we are in covenant with the Father and we are all always part of His family.

until the end of the age.

The coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness