

TRINITY SUNDAY – FR JOHN SPRING - 30TH MAY 2010

In nomine Domine, Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

This morning's first reading is one which is often read on Trinity Sunday and which is one of the most intriguing in all of the Old Testament. However, I don't want to say a lot about it except to explain why I have asked the reader to read from a bible translation other than the NRSV. After that, I will talk about the doctrine of the Trinity itself, which is more important.

I chose not to have the reading taken from the New Revised Standard Version because, in verse 10, the NRSV makes one very small but significant change to the text that amounts to an interpretation. For this change and the interpretation, other bible translators apparently see no need and neither do I. In fact, I believe it corrupts the text and it undermines the traditional Christian reading of Genesis 18 as an Old Testament anticipation of the New Testament doctrine of the Trinity.

In the NRSV, then, verse 10 begins with the words "Then one said", meaning "then one of the three angels said". Other translations, however, all say, either "THE LORD said", or "He said". Why is this important?

Abraham and Sarah were living in their tent among the trees of Mamre and, in the heat of the day, Abraham was resting in the doorway of the tent. Then he realized there were three men, or angels in human form, standing some distance off. He hurries to greet them and, presumably prompted by their noble appearance, he bows low to the ground in front of them. Abraham addresses all three, calling them "My Lord", that is, as though they are one. The narrator often refers to these three human-like angels as "THE LORD", which is the English translation of the religious code word ADONAI. "Adonai" is not a real word but conceals within it a reference to the name of God. The three angels are also referred to as "he" (not "they") and the three of them speak for God (ADONAI) and in unison. So, when Abraham offers to make *them* a meal (actually Sarah does the work), the narrator tells us that *he* answers, "Very well, do as you say."

So, throughout the passage, the three are one and the one is all three – except, that is, in the NRSV which changes verse 10 to read, "Then one [of them] said". Now, if one of the angels is made to speak, even once, in isolation from the other two, the passage loses its otherwise perfect consistency, and the beauty and mystery of the story as a manifestation of the three-fold nature of God is spoilt and obscured by human presumption on the part of the translators.

But now, let me come to what is really important today, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

It is this doctrine which, more than any other single article of our belief, distinguishes Christians from the members of other religions. We alone believe that God is a Triune God, three in one and one in three *and* that Jesus Christ is one of the three. Yet this is a doctrine which is not easy to hold, and we Christians, being merely human, and less than perfect at that, do have a tendency to slip backwards and sideways into other ways of understanding God. We call these other ways of believing "heresies" and there are many of them, but I won't go into them now.

The problem for us in grasping the Trinity as a *doctrine* lies in our ordinary human brains. We have brains which hold to the Sesame Street rule, namely, that *five is always five*. Yet in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the coming of the Holy Spirit to bring the Church to birth and to empower its witness, worship and ministry to this very day, our brains encounter something which refuses to sit with the Sesame Street rule.

We begin with an unshakeable conviction that God is our Father and so the Father is divine; but then we meet the Son who, in our experience of him, is also divine and was called so by his disciples; and then we meet the Spirit who, yet again, is divine in our experience. Now either we say these are *three gods*, or we have to abandon the Sesame Street rule and say these three divine persons are *not three gods*, but *one God in three persons*. Or, as I learnt somewhere in my childhood, God is “Three in one and one in three, ruler of the earth and sea.”

However, being logical, we still tend to slip off the top of the doctrine and slide back to something more simple and logical – *but false*. Trinity Sunday is therefore a call to return to the catholic and orthodox faith of the Church. It is not an invitation to find it suddenly *easy to believe* (no-one, and certainly not St Patrick, has ever succeeded in making it that) but Trinity Sunday does call upon us *to hold to the language and the formula*, and to *rest in the mystery*. It also offers us a blessing, the blessing of knowing by faith that not only is the Father God, but Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God.

Trinity Sunday is therefore a call to affirm that the doctrine we hold is of God as a “tri-unity” - that is, God is three in *one* and *one* in three. We are here, then, to affirm that *God is one* as well as to declare that *God is three*. Therefore, to know and love the Spirit is to know and love the Son; to know and love the Son is to know and love the Father; and to know and love the Father is to know and love the Son and the Spirit. And it is to be known and loved by all three.

As Anglicans, we hold that *nothing may be taught as necessary to salvation except that which can be proven from the Holy Scriptures*. Some people, however, say that the word “trinity” is not mentioned in the bible and so our salvation cannot hang upon it. In fact, some sects, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, look upon the doctrine of the Trinity as a pagan corruption of the ancient biblical faith. But the universal Church holds this doctrine, as declared in the Nicene Creed, as an article of the Faith *and* as necessary to salvation. So where *in the bible* does this doctrine come from?

There are many passages in the New Testament which, rightly understood, imply the divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and their intimate relationship to each other. Here are some of them:

1. "As soon as Jesus Christ was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landing on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." [Mt. 3:16–17, Mk 1:10–11, Lk 3:22, Jn 1:32]
2. "The angel answered and said to [Mary], "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God." [Luke 1:35]

3. "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." [Acts 7:55]

4. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God [that is, the love of God the Father] and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." [2 Cor. 13:14]

We probably think of the Gospel according to St Matthew, however, as the one which most plainly declares the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, in Chapter 28, where Matthew records Jesus' last command to his disciples, to **"Go into all the world and make disciples of people of every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"**.

Yet it was the Gospel According to St John which provided the Early Fathers with the bulk of the teaching that they needed to establish that God was and is indeed a Trinity of divine persons – not just to establish the *idea*, but also to establish the *language* needed to express it. It is, after all, John who, at the very beginning of his gospel, pronounces Jesus to be the Word, or the Logos, who was "with God from the beginning" and who is God. It is also John who, in John 15:26, records Jesus, telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit and saying that "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf". In this Year of St John, then, when we take our gospel readings from John's gospel, I commend it to you as a way of seeking and coming to a deeper understanding of God the Holy and Indivisible Trinity.

Of course, the complete doctrine of the Trinity was established over some five to six centuries and, today being Trinity Sunday, and we being Anglicans, we have just said the so-called "Athanasian Creed" which has been in use in the Church since the 6th Century. This document is not so much a creed as a credal hymn and it was probably composed in the late 5th or early 6th Centuries and named after Bishop Athanasius who had been a stellar advocate and defender of this doctrine.

The importance of this doctrine is enormous. It is the basis of our Christian understanding of God, of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. It is the basis of our understanding of the Church and of Christian community. It also informs our understanding of the earth and all its creatures and of human life. It informs our works of compassion and justice, and it guides our proclamation of truth. We test all our other beliefs and our values against it, to see whether they measure up to it and embody its principles. I only wish I had time to introduce you to a church development process called Natural Church Development which, unlike any other I know of, springs out of the understanding of the three persons of God, and the three corresponding dimensions of the human being who bears the image of God.

And to bring it down to our own level, where we are, living our Christian lives, day by day, it is the knowledge, love and continuing experience of God as One and God as Three which inspires and guides us. We are, indeed, not only Christians but Trinitarians, the people of the Trinity.

*Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto:
sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.*

Fr John Spring