

The Trinity Revealed

May 27, 2018 – The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

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Readings: Deuteronomy 4.32-34, 39-40; Romans 8.14-17; Matthew 28.16-20

This great Solemnity is celebrated after those of the Ascension and of Pentecost. By this progression, the Church is guiding us through the mysteries of the salvation of the universe in Jesus Christ that follow the pivotal feast of Easter, and we are following the historical sequence in which these events happened. The point: these things happened in human history, and in human history events follow one after another, building on what went before.

The Experience of the Jewish People

One of the humble German professor Joseph Ratzinger's many memorable lines was that we learned of God as Trinity through the historical experience of the Jewish people. That line has stayed with me as a reminder of how God entered human history to reach us in ways that we are open to, namely, in words and deeds. This mode of approach reached its zenith in the Incarnation and continues in the sacraments and in the lives of people who are living sacraments – the baptized, the ordained, and the married.

The readings today begin with a passage from the book of Deuteronomy in which Moses asks, "Did anything so great happen before?" More specifically: "Did any God venture to go and take a nation for himself?" Then Moses reviewed all of the events that led to the creation of Israel as the People of God, and how each of these events was caused by God.

We hear that if this is what God has done, "then fix in your heart, that the Lord is God . . . that there is no other." The one true God is the one who acts. Furthermore, because this is the authentic God and not a human fabrication, "you must keep his statutes and commandments that I enjoin on you today."

The uniqueness of God has consequences. The people he has chosen must live in a certain way so that they are worthy of his patronage. Furthermore, such cooperation will result in the people having a "long life on the land." On one level this meant having general security, but more specifically and importantly it meant that they had a secure place to offer worship. Also, they were to be an exemplary people. From Isaiah we learn that this would be a people who "ceased doing evil, learned to do good," and who "heard the orphan's plea [and] defended the widow" (Is 1.17).

The responsorial psalm develops the theme of security in this larger sense. The unfolding of the liturgy today puts the psalm into the mouths of the worshipping people who have just heard the words of Moses. By doing this, the congregation today takes on the meaning of the earlier experience of Moses and the Jewish People of God, and is brought into the current experience of the new People of God, the Body of Christ, in this particular time and place.

In the psalm, then, the security of the People of God, old and new, is expressed and celebrated as a life of blessedness, of justice and right – a life under the eyes of the Lord, for those who fear him. (Fear, in this sense, is awe at actually standing before the reality of the divinity.) Moreover, in this wonderful divine embrace there is the great promise of being delivered from death.

The first reading spoke of Moses' words and shared their significance as expressing the words of God. These expand almost beyond comprehension in the New Testament with the revelation of Jesus as the Divine Word, present in human history as one of us, a human being – and yet one who is the person of the Divine Word. But there is something more to be added to our understanding of the way God works in the world, which we learn in the second reading.

Who God Is – Paul's Sketch

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, and here we hear of the eternally originating Divine Father by whom we have been adopted. Previously, the Divine Fatherhood was implicit in the role God takes on to build up his people. (It is specifically mentioned in the Old Testament, in Psalms 2 and 68, for example.) God's activity brings us to the point where we can call God the Father by the familiar term, *Abba*.

Then Paul offers two important points to add to our comprehension of who God is – which is, after all, what today's feast is all about. First, there is the announcement that God's adopting us comes through the act of the Divine Spirit of God, who is identified as the "Spirit of Adoption," and who is sent by the Divine Father. Second, Paul mentions Christ, with whom we must suffer if we wish to be "glorified" with him. Other Pauline texts speak of Christ as the Divine Son. The gospels identify him as the suffering and glorified Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish human being.

So, in a brief and very dense text, Paul sketches out the nature of the mysterious God who is Father and who works in the world by sending the Spirit and the Son, one to work within us as the Spirit of Adoption, and one to work outside of us in the concrete circumstances of life, in the human context of the Church, where the Church is the Body of Christ. This institution of the Church as the Body of Christ is analogous to God's making a people as a sign to the nations in the Old Testament.

There are complexities missing from this picture – such as the fact that God works in the world as the complete Trinity, not "coming apart" in any sense, and the fact that the Father is not a distant Father with two subordinates, Son and Spirit – that still need to be fleshed out. But in a compact way Paul's presentation is complete.

The Trinity and the Church

Today's gospel returns to yet another historical event, the meeting of the risen Jesus with the eleven after the events of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The text is taken from Matthew, and the historical interaction with Jesus is summed up in the verb "saw" – "They all saw him." Then comes the moment that transcends history – "They worshiped him." This as a massive break in historical terms: Up to this point in history, no human being was to be worshiped, for one worshiped God alone. That was the first of the Ten Commandments. Yet here is a group of faithful Jews worshiping this particular human being, one who had risen from the dead. Thus the divinity of Jesus, who is the Incarnation of the Divine Person of the Son, is doubly affirmed.

The last section of the gospel passage is the text of the divine mandate to the Church. Much as the Jewish people had heard again and again of the divine mandate to Israel mentioned in the first reading from Deuteronomy, now Jesus himself first announces his own authority – "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me" – which is divine authority. Then he says, "Make disciples of all the nations," signaling the institution of the universal Church.

Just as the Jewish people were to be a specific sign of God's favor to all the nations on earth, now the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is forming a new People of God, a people under his favor. They are to be baptized in the name of God, thus freeing them from their sins, filling them with his Spirit, and enabling them to follow his teaching. They are also to pass on his teaching. And, in some extraordinary way, through the Church Jesus is "with you always." It is he who still walks the earth through the instrument of his Church.

Finally, in this gospel passage there is the Holy Spirit, whose mission is to heal and sanctify the spirits of the faithful. They are healed and made holy in order that they might be the visible communion of the Spirit, known as the Church, which is the Body of Christ, formed through the concrete activities of preaching the teaching of Christ and celebrating his sacraments, as Saint Paul was doing in Rome. We may observe, therefore, a wonderful concurrence in the movement of the Divine Trinity and the movement of the Church, which continues throughout history and to this day.

For Further Reading

Francis J. Beckwith, ["How God Is Incomprehensible, Simple, and a Trinity"](#)

Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##232-267](#)

["Reflections on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity by Pope Benedict XVI during His Pontificate"](#)

Tim Staples, ["Explaining the Trinity"](#)

In Short . . .

The people God chooses must live in a certain way so that they are worthy of his patronage, and their cooperation results in "long life on the land" and security to worship.

The security of the People of God is celebrated as a life of blessedness, of justice and right – a life under the eyes of the Lord for those who stand in awe of him.

The mysterious God who is Father works in the world by sending the Spirit and the Son; one works within us as the Spirit of Adoption, and one outside of us through the Church.

Before Christ, no human being was to be worshiped; yet a group of faithful Jews affirmed his divinity by worshiping this particular human being who had risen from the dead.

Just as the Jewish people were a sign of God's favor to all the nations, now the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forms a new People of God under his favor.

In some extraordinary way, through the Church Jesus is "with you always" and still walks the earth.