

## Holy Trinity Sunday 07/06/2020A

On this Trinity Sunday, I would like to ask you something about your prayer life. If you want to address God in your prayer conversation, are you more likely to address God as “Father” or as “Jesus” or as “Spirit”? In the sample prayer that Jesus gave us, he started with “Our Father...” It would certainly be appropriate to address God this way in prayer.

Praying to Jesus is a long-standing tradition in the Christian faith. In his letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul writes that God gave Jesus “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...and every tongue should confess... that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:9-11). The power of using Jesus’ name in prayer is best exemplified in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition of the “Jesus Prayer.” In order to open up their hearts to God and follow Saint Paul’s command to pray unceasingly, penitents pray the following line over and over: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

So, there are precedents for addressing our prayers to the Father or the Son. What about dedicating them to the Spirit? Just before departing from this world, in one of my favourite Bible passages, Jesus himself told his disciples that he would send an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who would help us in our prayers, who would intercede for us “with sighs too deep for words.” The Spirit does this because we “do not know how to pray as we ought.” We have Saint Paul telling us to pray in the name of Jesus, and Jesus suggesting we pray to the Father through the Holy Spirit.

It’s been said that Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday in the church year that commemorates a theological proposition. The word, “Trinity” appears nowhere in the Bible. The first recorded use of the Greek word *Trias* (Τριάς) (set of three) in Christian theology came from Theophilus of Antioch in about 170 AD. To this Greek scholar, the Trinity consisted of God, God’s word (*logos*), and God’s wisdom (*sophia*). You see remnants of this viewpoint in the beginning of John, when Jesus is called the “Word of God” (In the beginning was the Word...) and in the Book of Proverbs when Wisdom says that she was present before the creation of the world. Is Wisdom the Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit female? Are women wiser than men? After years of watching men falling from ladders on the TV show Australia’s Funniest Home Videos, one might be tempted to think so! In any case, even though the Son, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and the Father’s voice were all present at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, it wasn’t until the writings of the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed 300 years later that the concept of the Trinity really got fleshed out.

The Trinity is a human invention designed to help us understand what cannot be fully understood: the true nature of God. Yes, there is God the Creator, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, but there is only one God. Winston Churchill once famously said that “Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. Maybe we should revise the Trinitarian formula and baptise in the name of the riddle, the mystery, and the enigma.

Let’s agree, then, that the Trinity is a mystery. We are called to engage the mystery, but we will never fully unravel it. A created being could never fully understand its creator. We don’t fully understand our own minds, our own being; how could we ever fully grasp the mind and being of God? On the other hand, the concept of the Trinity gives us our best chance to begin to understand. How do I know that this is the best approach to understanding God? Because it is the one recommended by Jesus when he said, “Go therefore and make disciples, baptising them in name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” So, let’s break down the three parts of the Trinity, and see that they are, in fact, one.

Let’s start with the Father. When we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,” we aren’t just praying to one third of the Trinity. We are praying to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in very personal terms. The word Jesus uses in this prayer is *abba*, which means “papa” or “daddy,” as compared to the Latin *pater*, which is the more formal “father.” We are to pray to the triune (three-person) God, then, in very familiar terms. Since there are many images of God in the Bible which are feminine, we are not to think of the triune God in solely masculine or feminine terms. We are children praying to the One who creates, redeems, and protects us.

Part of the confusion surrounding God the Father results from a distorted partial notion that the God of the Old Testament (who is generally connected with God the Father) is a cruel, unforgiving tyrant who is finally overcome by the loving Son, Jesus. However the full picture presents a God of the Old Testament who

creates the world as something good and loves it accordingly: especially beloved are men and women, for they are made in the very image of their creator. The Old Testament God is constantly redeeming the children of Israel, forgiving them and bringing them back into relationship. Finally, the God of Abraham and Moses is a faithful God who keeps promises and is always present when needed.

So, it isn't only the Son who'll save you, and it isn't just the Holy Spirit who will protect and guide you. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in their love for you and concern for your well-being. When Jesus prays to the Father, this is very different from us praying, "Our Father" because while we are clearly children of our creator, the Son is not made but is eternally begotten (he has no beginning or end). He is, as the Nicene Creed says, of one being with the one who made all things. The human Jesus may have been born to suffer all the ills that flesh is heir to, but the resurrected Son of God was present at creation and will be present beyond the end times. In trying to understand the Son, we are caught in a delicate balancing act: Jesus is truly human and truly divine. Make him anything less than truly human, and you run the risk of rendering the sacrifice of the cross meaningless. If the figure on the cross isn't human, there's no pain, no suffering, no doubt, no fear, and no loss of life.

If you, on the other hand, make Jesus anything less than truly divine, you run the risk of rendering the gospel meaningless. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. Because of this, you cannot hold that he was merely a good and wise teacher. Either he was who he claimed to be, or he was a liar or a lunatic. Further, if Jesus is not the true Son of God, he cannot come again, and the good news of the gospel is null and void. As C.S. Lewis pointed out in *Mere Christianity* there are no half measures with Jesus: you must believe his claims completely or not at all. As I said, there is no separation between the Son and Father: Jesus says that when you have seen him, you have seen the Father.

Finally, we come to the Holy Spirit. The danger inherent in the Holy Spirit is that we often try to see the Spirit as something separate from the Father and the Son. The Spirit is simply God's way of working in the world since Jesus' ascension to the Father. The Spirit is an advocate who will defend us, teach us, renew us, and unite us. The third person of the Trinity works through our minds as well as through our emotions. The Spirit is certainly present in enthusiastic prayers and anointing, but is also evident in thoughtful Bible study, in all forms of devout worship, and in the practice of loving-kindness and charity. Again, none of this sets the Spirit apart from the Father and the Son. The Spirit is merely God's way of being in the world in the present age. Any appeal to the Spirit is also an appeal to God, God works through the Spirit.

We believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as inseparable as the flame of three candles held together. Can you distinguish which part of the flame created by three candles belongs to each? In the same way, the Son and the Spirit are inseparable from the Father. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God: there's no way to distinguish between them.

So, why bother to speak of the Trinity at all? We speak of it because it has a past, a present, and a future. God the Father created the earth and cared for it like a mother hen watching over her chicks. God the Son took on earthly flesh with all its inherent weaknesses and endured unimaginable suffering and even death to redeem the earth and all the creatures on it. God the Holy Spirit was sent to help us hang on in the years between Jesus' death and the second coming of the Son. God is one, but we miss the vast richness of being and depth of love present in this one God if we lose sight of God's threefold nature: the glorious Trinity. As we move closer to God, we feel the warm love of the one who created us, the cleansing flames of the one who redeems us, and the fiery heat of the one who wants to get us moving. If we wrap ourselves in God's love, heal ourselves in God's grace, and catch the sparks of God's passion, we will set the world on fire.

Fr Robert Newton

1) *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis 1952