

THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

Today's celebration highlights for us what is central to our faith and life as Christians: That God is one God, yet three Persons; the Holy Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Everything we do as Christians is done 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,' but this maybe becomes so familiar, that the Church invites us today to reflect upon this deep mystery of who God is rather more explicitly.

It is interesting that it took centuries before Trinity Sunday was proclaimed an official feast for the entire Church. Why was this feast not celebrated from the beginning? One answer is that more often than not, the Church does not proclaim a key aspect of the faith until that aspect comes under attack. In the fourth and fifth centuries in particular, there was great controversy over whether Jesus, or the Holy Spirit for that matter, are truly divine Persons, in the sense that God the Father is a divine Person. The Church thus had to make its teaching about who God is more explicit, and that is partly why we now celebrate Trinity Sunday each year.

The term 'Holy Trinity' is not found anywhere in the Bible. However, the essential elements of what eventually became the doctrine of the Holy Trinity are contained in Scripture. For example, the Old Testament depicts God as Father of Israel and presents God as being a Person through concepts such as Word, Spirit, Wisdom, and Presence. In the New Testament, God is called the Father of Jesus Christ 170 times in the gospels. And Jesus himself addresses God as 'Abba', 'Father', a term of great intimacy and familiarity.

If Jesus calls God 'Abba', does that mean that Jesus, as the Son of God, is also divine? Well, this is a question that everyone at some stage has to ask him or herself, and the New Testament is itself evidence of the Church's own journey of discovering who Jesus really is. St. Paul in his writings explains how Jesus' *'state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are.'*¹ We hear also how Jesus, risen from the dead, is established as Lord and is now seated at the right hand of the Father, sharing equally in his majesty.² For St. Paul then, Jesus does seem to be God's equal. In the gospels, meanwhile, we find Jesus hinting at his divinity, and being accused of blasphemy.³ At the beginning of John's gospel, for example, we hear how Jesus is the Word who was with God in the beginning and that *'the Word was with God and the Word was God'*.⁴ At the end of that gospel, we also hear how doubting Thomas, upon seeing the risen Jesus, comes to believe and exclaims: *"My Lord and my God!"*⁵ The New Testament writers, then, who were themselves members of the Church, seem to understand Jesus as divine as the Father is divine.

What, then, of the Holy Spirit? Well, one of the factors in Jesus' understanding of God was the Old Testament idea of God's Spirit. According to Jewish tradition, the spirit of the Lord is the creative and life-giving energy of God (as in the account of creation, for example), as well as the power of God that came to rest on the judges, kings and prophets anointed to guide and challenge God's people. The spirit of the Lord is thus God's presence at work in the lives of God's people, especially in those called to lead the community to live according to God's will.

Among the great links between the Old and New Testaments is the expectation of an ideal leader who would be anointed with God's Spirit and would establish God's rule definitively in Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus is not only conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, but he is the one anointed by the Spirit of God to proclaim in person the presence of God's reign. Jesus is the Christ, or the 'anointed one', by virtue of that anointing of the Spirit. And again, in John's gospel, we find Jesus promising to send to the apostles the Holy Spirit, whom he says they already know

¹ Philippians 2:6-7.

² Cf. Romans 8:24; Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 3:1.

³ Eg. John 8:58-59.

⁴ John 1:1.

⁵ John 20:28.

because he is with them and in them.⁶ Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, He is also a divine Person as the Father and the Son are divine Persons. More obviously personal descriptions we find in scripture for the Holy Spirit include Paraclete (which means advocate or counsellor), helper (or comforter), and Lord.⁷

In today's gospel we have one of the most explicit biblical references to the Holy Trinity: the risen Jesus commissions the apostles to make disciples of all nations, and to baptise them "*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" Notice it is not in the 'names' of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, but in the 'name' of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Hence, the Church's doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Three Persons, yet One God, not three Gods.

The coming of Jesus has revealed to us that God is not one Person alone, but a family of Persons, in a perfect loving relationship with one another. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father in return, and that infinite and perfect love expressed between them is the Person of the Holy Spirit. That is who God is in Himself.

God desires that all of us share in this communion of perfect love. The work of creation was a work of the Holy Trinity: All creation, and indeed, each of us, were created by the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The work of redemption is also a work of the Holy Trinity: God the Father draws us back to Himself, through the Son, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. We too, by virtue of our baptism and our incorporation into the Church, share with Jesus in his divine Sonship. We too, are, in Jesus, the beloved of the Father.

The Catechism states: *'By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an internal exchange of love, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and he destines us to share in that exchange.'*⁸ In experiencing the love of the Father, we are drawn to love the Father in return, as Jesus does, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul says in today's second reading: *"Everyone moved by the Spirit is a son of God. The spirit you received... is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out, "Abba, Father!"*

God bless,

Fr Andy.

⁶ Cf. John 14:17.

⁷ Cf. John 14:16, 26; 15:26; Romans 8:26; 2 Corinthians 3:17.

⁸ CCC 221.