

Trinity Sunday 2020



On Trinity Sunday, unusually, the lectionaries of Common Worship and the Roman Missal diverge, so parishes may find themselves reading different passages.

Gospel *John 3.16-20*

During the night-time conversation with Nicodemus

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

The Gospel in Common Worship, which may be read instead, is Matthew 28.16-20:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Homily

Humanity reflects the love that made it

Today we are celebrating the feast of the Holy Trinity. After the Easter Season—after reliving the Ascension in which Christ establishes his heavenly presence in our hearts, and after Pentecost which renews the baptism of the Church in the Holy Spirit—we now gaze with the eyes of faith into the

depths of the mystery of God. Today is the 'feast of God', and we adore the communion of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It's a feast that preachers and congregations alike can be a bit afraid of, even a bit silly about. 'Impatient as we are, we would like to understand [the Trinity] *immediately*; or rather, in our shortsighted pragmatism, if we are not shown practical applications for it right away, we declare it to be abstract, indigestible, unrealistic, an empty shell, a hollow theory' (Henri de Lubac: *The Christian Faith*, 1969). Well there's plenty of short-sighted pragmatism to go round at present. But that kind of impatient reaction shuts us up inside the limits of our own narrow thoughts and experiences. Those Christians who *do not try* to peer into God—that is, who don't contemplate the *kind of God* that God has revealed himself to be—and *do not let themselves* be grasped and shaped by the experience, simply don't realize how poor, and deprived, and insecure they have made themselves. Of course! if the God we celebrate on this feast truly is as he has *revealed* himself to be, then we are going to need *every* philosopher, *every* historian, scientist, poet, mystic (and many others besides) to begin to understand so immense a truth. But today the Church does *not* become a lecture room! The *best* preachers of the Trinity are not academics. (Sorry to the academics!) The best preachers are the saints, those who have taken God at his word, and not lived superficially. The Blessed Trinity is not a secret 'reserved for the professional scholar, but is something that has a living, *practical* importance for every Christian.' (Kallistos Ware *The Orthodox Church* 1962, 216) Any Christian who speaks of the Holy Trinity, does not, in the words of one writer, 'speak of it as I would of some constellation in the sky, but I understand it to be the first principle and the ultimate end of *my* own Christian existence: faith in this supreme mystery includes *me*' (Romano Guardini *The Life of Faith* 1961, 50). This faith includes *my* creation, and the creation of my *brothers and sisters*; *my* redemption, and the redemption of my *brothers and sisters*; *my* sanctification and transfiguration, and that of my brothers and sisters. I'm sure that if Christians truly resolved to believe—by which I mean *trust*—in their faith, it would make them, today, the soul of the world. (see *Letter to Diognetus*, 6). Why? Well, I don't really want to say much more, but let me answer with *one* thought, in *two* bites:

First bite: God is personal love.

In today's first reading from *Exodus* 34 (4b-6, 8-9) we heard about God himself, in the cloud on Mount Sinai, passing before a terrified Moses and proclaiming his own Name: 'The Lord, the Lord! a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in steadfast love and faithfulness'. That is what God says of himself. That helps us understand a bit better the depths of truth summed up in St John's phrase, 'God is love' (*I Jn* 4: 8, 16 – a phrase which isn't of course true the other way round). We do not exist because of sheer chance, or blind process, or because of an overwhelming power, but because of love, the love of the God who calls *himself* love, omnipotence of love.

Jesus says something more in his conversation with Nicodemus. 'God loved the world so much that he gave' ... the most precious thing he could, his only Son (*Jn* 3.16). The God that the scriptures teach, and which Christians believe in, is not a mighty self-sufficient being but life that wants to *communicate* himself. The names God gives himself—mercy, compassion, grace, loving kindness—speak not only of mutuality and relationship but also of *self-offering*, of a God who fills gaps, strengthens weakness, heals wounds, transforms loss; of a God who is faithful, who constantly seeks to make a covenant, a love pact through which he can bless the whole of humanity (see *Gen* 12.1-3; *Ex* 19.3-6) and the world. And all of this is contained, fulfilled, and communicated in the life of Jesus Christ. Archbishop Michael Ramsey used to love to say 'God is Christlike', in other words Jesus is the *image* of God (*Col* 1.15). He reflects and reveals God's one nature communicated in three persons: the Father Love, the Son Love, the Spirit Love.

So much for the first bite: *God is personal love*.

The second is that *Humanity reflects God*, and can't be understood without God. We are his image and likeness. Jesus revealed that humanity is essentially a 'son', a child. Human beings are not self-made beings, but beings in a relationship with the divine Father. A human being is an *open* creature, *incomplete* as an individual, made for mutuality, reaching out to God, discovering in other human beings the image and likeness of their common Father, who are thus all brothers and sisters. Human dignity is constituted by love, and human society and civilization is fulfilled in love, relationship, dialogue. When we set out to privilege any human characteristic over against any other—whether of race or nation or language—well we set out on the road *away* from God, *reducing* God's likeness in us, moving toward idolatry. But the strongest proof that human beings are made in the image and likeness of the Trinity is that love alone makes us happy, forgiving, self-less, and wise. Because of the Trinity, we live to love and to be loved. The love of the Trinity is our true human genome!

Two thoughts then, but *one* truth. Two sides of one coin. First, God, the trinity of love and mutual relationship; second, human beings, in God's image and likeness, called into one in Christ.

On the Sunday after Pentecost the western churches celebrate the first. On the same day our Eastern brothers and sisters celebrate the second, the Trinity of holy love reflected in the lives of human beings, the saints. Together they remind us that Trinity Sunday must also for ever be 'Humanity Sunday': humanity, created, sanctified and glorified in Holy Love.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, image of the unseen Father, grant us restless hearts, hearts which seek your face. Keep us from the blindness of heart which sees only the surface of things. Give us the Spirit of simplicity and purity which allow us to recognize your presence in the world. May we encounter you along the way and show forth your image in the world. Amen.