

Sunday Homily

TRINITY SUNDAY

7 JUNE 2020

YEAR A

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 28:19

Illustration

Let me begin this address with a very short scriptural text: “Don’t say ‘Three!’” You may wonder where that comes from. Well, it’s not actually from the Bible but from the Qur’an, the scripture of Islam. The Qur’an warns Christians: “Don’t say ‘Three!’” It’s a sharp rejection of the doctrine of God as Trinity, Three-in-One.

On this Trinity Sunday it’s salutary to recall that many millions of believers in God see the doctrine of the Trinity as a serious mistake. Muslims passionately defend the oneness of God. They also believe in Jesus, but as a human prophet, not as the Son of God. They believe that Jesus and his original followers simply believed in one God, but that later Christians drifted away from this pure monotheism into errors about the Son of God and the Holy Spirit and so into the seemingly contradictory idea that God is both three and one. Other religious groups (Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example) also reject Trinitarian Christian faith in favour of a unitarian faith in God just as one. But for 1,400 years the challenge from Islam has posed some of the most searching questions Christians have had to face.

One response to this challenge might be to regard the doctrine of the Trinity as a problem, an obstacle in the way of good interfaith relations. (“Okay, we’ll stop saying ‘Three’, or at least won’t make so big a deal of it...”) Some Christians have been drawn in that direction; but recently there has been a recovery of confident belief in the Trinity and Christians have been realising afresh that this doctrine is neither an optional add-on to our faith nor a problem to be embarrassed about. It’s simply the best way of understanding what the New Testament says about Jesus and about the Christian experience of God.

Gospel Teaching

In today’s Gospel the risen Jesus commissions the eleven to make disciples of all nations, “baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit”. This is a pivotal moment in the Christian story: Jesus is saying that his own relationship with God is now to be opened up to all people; they are to be baptised (or “immersed”) into the life of God the Trinity.

Let's think further about Jesus' relationship with God. Throughout the story of Jesus we see his constant sense of himself as the Son, loved by the God he calls Father. And Jesus doesn't speak only of the Father; Jesus knows the love and guidance of the Father through a distinct personal presence whom he calls the Holy Spirit. Think of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan. As the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus he hears the Father saying, "You are my beloved Son", and is commissioned for the work which lies ahead of him. The love of the Father is poured out through the Spirit on the Son and returned in the loving obedience of the Son to the Father, again through the Spirit. This is God the Trinity, the Three-in-One, the God who is loving relationship in God's very self. And this has always been so; from eternity God has been Trinity. But in the life of Jesus, God made flesh, we see something of the Trinitarian life of God active in our world.

Application

Very nice for Jesus, we might think. Very nice for the Father, and for the Spirit too, but so what for us? Well, so a lot for us, actually. The point for us is that Jesus' relationship with God is opened up to us. We are invited to join in the relationship of love that flows within the life of God, that has been there from eternity and was seen in our world in Jesus. Jesus takes us by the hand and says, "Come with me and be led by the Spirit into the presence of the God I know as Father." We are to share in the life of the God who is love.

When we were baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, we were immersed in the life of the God who is love. And, as we see in Jesus, that life isn't static, but active, outgoing, self-giving. From his baptism onwards, Jesus' relationship with God was bound up with a mission, the life-giving, renewing, liberating mission of God in this world.

So also for us. On this Trinity Sunday may we and the whole Church of Christ be renewed in our faith in the God who is eternally love; and may we respond with joy and obedience to the call both to share in God's life and to participate in God's mission in the world.