

Trinity Sunday

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Over two weeks ago we celebrated the Ascension of Jesus the Christ. This not only marked our risen Lord's ascension to the right hand of the Father, but also the end of the Son of God's earthly ministry. The Apostles no longer can hear him tell parables; no longer can they see him heal the sick; no longer can they touch the wounds in his hands and feet; no longer does Jesus stand front and center against the money changers who make a mockery of prayer and the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; no longer can they see him expose moral hypocrisies. No more.

However, Jesus knew that his Ascension would leave his disciples in the lurch. And this is where Jesus' words just before our gospel reading today comes into play.

"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them." [John 16:2-4]

Recall the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, called the Hellenists, "[who] complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food." [Acts 6:1] The twelve Apostles called a meeting of Christians, and seven men were selected to distribute food to the Hellenist widows. One of these men was Stephen, "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" [Acts 6:5]. Not only was Stephen giving food to the poor Hellenist widows, but he also bore witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus who had ascended and sits at the right hand of his Father. St. Luke records that when Stephen spoke of Jesus, some people

"stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.'" [Acts 6: 9-14]

Like Jesus who was tried, condemned, and executed, so too was Stephen. Notice that Stephen's work of social justice, distributing food to poor widows, does not appear to be what upset those who opposed Stephen. What upset them was Stephen's belief in the Lord Jesus and Jesus' significance for law-abiding Jews. Stephen concludes his trial defense like this:

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now

you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.

[...]

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” [Acts 7:51-83]

What I want to draw attention to is this: Jesus knew that these sorts of things would happen to his disciples, and he knew that it was vital for the salvation of the world that his disciples inescapably remind and teach others of who Jesus is and what he has done, just as Stephen filled with the Holy Spirit would do. For this to happen, Jesus said the following in his farewell to the disciples:

"I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world as been condemned.” [John 16: 7-11]

The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sends to us from the Father, has several missions. According to this passage from John’s gospel, which comes just before the reading we heard today, The Holy Spirit "will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment”. At issue here is the very identity of Jesus Christ and whether Jesus’ conviction and execution are the final words on who Jesus is.

The Holy Spirit will prove to those who oppose Jesus, and who think he is an accursed convict, that they have sinned in believing this about Jesus. For disbelief in Jesus is a grave sin. The Holy Spirit will convict the world of its wrong doing by showing that Jesus is in fact righteous—the righteous victor over false accusations, conviction, and death. The Holy Spirit will prove that Jesus has triumphed over the demonic powers that plagued our world. For these pretentious powers of despair and death have been "condemned”. The Holy Spirit, like a wind out of our control, springs Jesus’ words, life, and love into our very hearts so that each of us will be a witness of these things to ourselves and to our neighbors.

One could go on talking about the fruits of the Spirit, but today is Trinity Sunday. And I would like to say some words about the Trinity. In fact, I already have said some things about the Trinity; I have already laid out some of the Trinitarian impulses of the New Testament. The reason I began by talking about Jesus, Jesus’ foretelling of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit’s missions, and the work of the Spirit in the life of the first martyr, St. Stephen, is this: the Christian doctrine of God did not begin from a clever philosopher’s reflections on God, but from God’s self-revelation in Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit through Christ’s disciples. Christian belief begins with God’s self-revelation. When some christian theologian takes up the topic of the

Trinity for rational reflection, she presupposes what Christians generally believe about God. Even when Christian theologians begin their essays restating Christians beliefs like this

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Holy Spirit is God, and
4. There is only one God,

these Christian theologians presuppose, consciously or unconsciously, things that give rise to these four summary statements of Christian belief. They presuppose the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the continuation of Jesus' mission by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit-filled lives of Jesus' disciples. If we were to start reflecting on our belief that God is a Trinity of persons, we might start with these four summary statements that depend on the witness of Scripture, or we might start with the witness of Scripture. There are advantages to each approach. The Christian theologians who focuses on these four summary beliefs can grind her philosophical axe by reflecting on what the verb 'is' in each of these summary beliefs is supposed to express. How can we interpret these four statements so that an explicit contradiction does not arise? For at first glance it looks like these four statements taken together amount to simple mistake in addition: how can there be *one* God, yet *three* persons who are God. If there are three persons, and each is God, why are there not *three* Gods?

Fortunately, there are Christian theologians that have shown how we can understand these four summary statements in a way that no contradiction arises. I take this to be a helpful and salutary achievement. But a downside to this sort of approach to the Trinity is that it is difficult to preach. Which of you wants to sit through a sermon about different uses of the verb 'is', and how one of the uses of this verb shows that there is no inconsistency of belief when we confess that 'the Father *is* God, the Son *is* God, the Holy Spirit *is* God, and there *is* only one God'.

The approach that I just talked about I call the "ontological, or metaphysical, approach". This approach concerns itself with asking "What exists: one God or three Gods? And, "Are we right to say that the Son *is* God?" As important as the "ontological approach" is, I want to focus on another sort of approach, one that is more on the ground, one that is a bit closer to the witness of Scripture and the words of Christ. I call this the "functional approach".

When you see some gadget at a store, you might ask, "What does it do? What is its function?" Now, when you look at two things that are similar to each other, you can imagine that one of them does what it can do right now, and the other that is similar to it might not be doing what it can do right now. Two things that are similar do not necessarily act together. For example, if you were to hold one electronic toothbrush in your left hand, and push the "on" button, your left hand will shake. But if you are holding another electronic toothbrush in your right hand, and push the "on" button, then your right hand will shake too. Notice that when one electronic toothbrush is shaking, the other might not. Although each toothbrush does the same *kind* of activity—that activity of shaking—there is no necessary connection that when one toothbrush is shaking that the other must also be shaking. Let's say that the action of these two electronic con-

sists of a mere *kind* of action; they both can shake if turned "on"; but there is no necessary connection that when one shakes the other must also shake. In fact, in most all cases things that are similar share a *kind* of action, but there is no intimate unity of action. If two things are the same kind of thing, and they have an intimate unity of action, then if one does what it can do, then the other necessarily does it too. The heart of the "functional approach" to thinking about the Trinity is that the three persons have an intimate unity of action. For example, when the Father creates creatures, the Son creates creatures, and the Holy Spirit creates creatures.

With the "functional approach" in mind, consider the words of our gospel reading today. Jesus not only says that the Spirit will lead his disciples so that they will witness to those who oppose Jesus, and thereby vindicate Jesus from the world's false judgment about him and his victory over death; but Jesus also reveals the extraordinary unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three persons have the same knowledge; for what the Father has, Jesus has, and what Jesus has, the Spirit has. And what the Holy Spirit declares to us is what the Holy Spirit has in common with the Father and Son. Consider what the church father Hilary of Poitiers says about today's reading from John's Gospel.

"According to the Apostle, Lord, your Holy Spirit fully understands and penetrates your inmost depths. He also intercedes on my behalf, saying to you things for which I cannot find the words. Nothing can penetrate your being but what is divine already. Nor can the depths of your immense majesty be measured by any power that itself is alien or extrinsic to you. So, whatever enters into you is yours already, nor can anything that has the power to search your very depths ever has been other than your own. [...] Your Holy Spirit proceeds through your Son from you. Though I may fail to grasp the full meaning of that statement, I give it nonetheless the firm assent of my mind and heart. I may indeed show dullness and stupidity in my understanding of these spiritual matters. It is as your only Son has said: "Do not be surprised if I have said to you: "You must be born again." Just as the wind blows where it pleases and you hear the sound of it without knowing where it is coming from or going to, so will it be with everyone who is born of water and the Holy Spirit." [On the Trinity, 12:55-57]

In today's reading Jesus says that

"when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" [John 16:13-15]

This is evidence that what is the Father's, is the Son's, and is the Holy Spirit's. What the Holy Spirit declares to us is precisely what the Father and Son declare to us. There is an intimate unity of action had by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that no creatures have. This unity is much more intimate than the kinds of unity that creatures might have with one another. When JRR Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, there was not another person also writing *The Lord of the Rings*. But when God created the world, there were three persons who created the world together.

When Jesus became incarnate, died for our sins, and redeemed us with his victory over death, there were three persons who planned that this would happen and willed that this would happen. For what is the Father's, is the Son's, and is the Holy Spirit's, now and forever.

But if we believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, why does it matter? From a functional perspective, it shows us that God is not aloof and ignorant of our joys, trials, and tragedies. For the Holy Spirit continues the work of Christ by declaring to us the world's mistaken judgments about Jesus and his victory over death and false condemnation. The Holy Spirit brings us to participate in Jesus' righteousness in his earthly ministry to the newly married at Cana, to the sick, to the outcast, to the depressed, to the powers that be, and that we participate in his victory over death in the life of the world to come.

What difference does it make that God is a Trinity of persons? One thing to keep in mind is obedience to God: God's self-revelation through salvation history has led us to believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For this is what God has revealed. If we deny that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then we commit the grievous sin of sharing in the world's false condemnation of Jesus and his victory over death. If we denied that the Holy Spirit is God, would we be denying that what Jesus said about the Holy Spirit is true and then imply that Jesus is a liar. If we deny that Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and there is only one God, then we call God's self-revelation a lie.

We read in John 16:13 "[the Holy Spirit] will declare to you the things that are to come". Now,

"in the Jewish Scriptures one of the formulations used in connection with Yahweh's predictions of the future, and distinguishing Yahweh from the gods of the nations, is 'declaring the things to come'. Employing the formulation here underlines that the Spirit is the divine Spirit who comes from the Father. And just as Jesus has predicted the future, not least in this farewell discourse, so the Spirit will also continue this predictive activity, giving insight into the future the disciples will have to face and into the divine purposes for the world that have already become operative in Jesus." [Andrew Lincoln, *Black's New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to John*, p. 421]

If being able to know the future is God's attribute, and both Jesus and the Holy Spirit have this attribute, and what is the Father's, is the Son's and is the Holy Spirit's, then these three persons are the very same God. Their most intimate unity of action is evidence that they are the same God.

As St. Augustine reports, Jesus own words from our gospel reading show us this most intimate unity of the divine persons' actions.

"For the Holy Spirit is not inferior to the Son, as certain heretics have imagined, as if the Son received from the Father and the Holy Spirit received from the Son in reference to some kind of gradation of natures. ... [Jesus] himself immediately solves this difficulty and explains his own words, "All things that the Father has are mine; for this reason I said that [the Holy Spirit] shall take of mine and shall show it to you." [Tractates on the Gospel of John 100.4]

On Trinity Sunday let us begin at the beginning with the Holy Spirit that the risen and victorious Christ has sent to us from the Father to continue his own work in our hearts, minds, and to the end of the world. Why does it matter that (1) the Father is God, (2) the Son is God, (3) the Holy Spirit is God, and (4) there is only one God? If we say that we believe Jesus' testimony about himself, then should believe he is God, that is, God the Son. Even more, if we say that we believe Jesus' words, then we should believe that he has sent the Holy Spirit who takes from what is [the Father's and the Son's] and declares it to us. In fact, our participation in Christ's righteousness when we minister to the sick, the lonely, and the proud, depends on the Holy Spirit's work in our lives today. And, the fulfillment of our hope to see the Trinity of persons face to face "in heaven", and the resurrection of our bodies, also depends on the Holy Spirit's work in our lives today. Why? Because your *faith*, *hope* and *love* in Christ, which connect you to the person and work of Christ—including the resurrection of Jesus' body from the dead—comes to you through the Holy Spirit who "takes what is [Jesus'] and declares it to you." If the Holy Spirit were not the same God as the Father and Son, then we would be left with the faint memory of Christ, but not the presence of Christ to you today.

In thinking about the Trinity by this "functional approach" we learn that there is a most intimate unity of the Father's, Son's, and Holy Spirit's actions that is possible. For the same God that has called you, and the same God that became incarnate, lived a righteous life, received a false conviction and suffered execution, only to be resurrected from the dead, is also the same God that "declares to you" now what is the Father's and the Son's. The Father sent his Son to us, and after the Son was crucified, resurrected and ascended, they have sent us the Holy Spirit who reassures us in the time of trial and restores in us the theological virtues of *faith*, *hope*, and *love*. For the Holy Spirit brings us into our participation of Christ's righteousness.

Earlier I mentioned two approaches to thinking about the Trinity: an "ontological approach" and a "functional approach". On the "functional approach" to thinking about the Trinity, we find that there is the most intimate unity of the Father's, Son's, and Holy Spirit's actions that is possible. I should prepare you, however, that when you enter the functional foray, the ontological onus will soon be at your heels. This is why our Nicene faith professes that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the *same substance (homoousia)*, or in contemporary English, "one being". This ontological account supports and defends our understanding of the persons' most intimate unity of action that is possible. To deny the persons are the very same being or substance would lead us to suppose that the persons' most intimate unity of action is an illusion. To deny the persons are the same being would be like saying that Holy Spirit might or might not declare to us what is the Father and Son's. By professing they are the same God, the same being, we are professing that the Holy Spirit necessarily declares to us what is the Father's and what is the Son's. To contemplate the intimate unity of the divine persons actions in your life is vital to your spiritual health. For it directs your thoughts and fixes your desires to Christ and your participation in Christ's righteousness. For we worship one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.