

The Strong Name of the Holy Trinity

Meta

Date: May 26, 2024; Trinity Sunday

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Exodus 3.1-6

John 3.1-16

Opening

In the year of our Lord 2024 on Trinity Sunday, let it be known and recorded that the Rector of Apostles Anglican Church was *not* on vacation. Not only was he not on vacation, let the record show that he stood in the pulpit and preached. For those who are newer to Anglican faith, you are now included on the inside joke across parishes, dioceses, and throughout this good Province, that rectors notoriously hit the road when Trinity Sunday arrives. I actually will be hitting the road on vacation next Saturday, but mark me present and preaching for Trinity Sunday 2024.

Keeping with Anglican humor, let's hear one of our own great writers and theologians, Dorothy Sayers offer her whimsical, catechism-style take on what the nominal Anglicans of her day *actually* thought about the Trinity.

Question: What does the Church think of God the Holy Spirit?

Answer: I don't know exactly. He was never seen or heard of until Pentecost. There is a sin against him that condemns you forever, but nobody knows what it is.

Question: What (does the Church think) of the doctrine of the Trinity?

Answer: 'The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible.' Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult—nothing to do with daily life or ethics.¹

Now that playful section comes from an essay entitled 'The Dogma is the Drama,' and once she's done having a bit of fun, Sayers' expresses her deep conviction that Christians must never take on the likeness of a 'crashing and ill-natured bore.' Rather, if we actually found the grandeur of drama in our doctrine, the truths we profess about God would actually make us *glad*.

That is my aim this Trinity Sunday—to find within God in Three Persons truths that would make us glad. Let us remember that this is a feast day—a day to celebrate, to take heart, to sing and smile.

In my younger years, I subconsciously thought that I must get all these concepts into my brain before I can *really* experience the Trinity. We are good Anglicans so we do not discard our brains. Does a

¹ Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 'The Dogma Is the Drama,' 18

toddler need to understand the science of calories, vitamins, and proteins to eat? No, parents feed their children good food and they are nourished. As they mature, they will learn more about the nature of ingredients and diet, but the most important thing is eat everyday.

Our mother, the Church, nourishes us with the truths of the Trinity. Our comprehension of God in Three Persons is much less important than that we eat regular meals that she offers.

I often think of Psalm 131 on Trinity Sunday:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.

What I would like to gaze upon today is the Name of the Trinity. Often we consider God's nature on Trinity Sunday and that can be nourishing, too. Today I want to meditate on his Name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we meditate on God's Name, that will lead us to experience God in three ways. We experience Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in belonging, in praying, and in praising his Name.

Theology of the Name

Let's explore the Name of God a bit further. "When I say God, I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."² That was the proclamation of St Gregory the Theologian in the 4th century, a church father I'll quote further today.

The Name of God is an apocalypse. Apocalypse means a drawing back of a veil, a revelation. Such it was for Moses when he turned toward the burning bush on Mount Sinai, when God spoke from the bush saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.' On Mount Sinai, Moses learned that God's Name is the great I AM. God spoke his Name and Moses encountered awesome glory and knowledge; and yet mystery that transcends his knowledge.

Why, one may wonder, did the Lord not reveal to Moses the triune Name we profess? Let's answer that question with a question: why must we guard our eyes from looking at a solar eclipse? Because the light is too much for us, it would blind our vision without eye protection.

Not only is God's being too great for us, remember that *when* God reveals himself, his own people reject him. Remember that, when God revealed himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai, Israel made a golden calf at the foot of the mountain. Remember that, when Jesus revealed himself as the Son of God, when he spoke of God as his Father, the world rejected him and he was crucified. God revealed himself in the fullness of time; *after* our Lord's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. For us to see the truth about God, we had to receive light and knowledge from the Holy Spirit. This is why we celebrate Trinity Sunday right after Pentecost.

Just before his ascension and the coming of the Spirit, Jesus commanded his apostles to go and baptize disciples in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus' words there are very deliberate: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a single Name. 'Go and baptize disciples in *the Name*. A

² St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Festal Orations*, ed. John Behr, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, vol. 36, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 164

more literal translation is ‘go and baptize disciples *into the Name*.³

Bring them into my Name; meaning ‘bring them into the inside of God.’

Some theologians speak of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of inwardness. St. Paul says ‘the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.’ The Spirit searches our inner depths; the Spirit searches the depths of love, beauty, glory, and goodness shared between Father, Son, and Spirit. And it is the Spirit given to our hearts in baptism by whom we cry out ‘Abba, Father.’

God made us so that we would know him by Name—the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is eternal life, not just the promise that we will not die. Eternal life is knowing the triune God from the inside. That’s what Jesus offered to Nicodemus; not only the promise that he would not perish, but that he could know God from the inside, from the heart.

There are many metaphors of the Trinity, some are helpful, others misleading, all of them breakdown at some point. I am most fond, however, of this trinitarian metaphor given by an anonymous monk of the Eastern Church who said,

*Each heartbeat is an impulse by which the Father gives himself. These beats send towards us the Blood of the Son, given life by the breath of the Spirit.*⁴

Belonging

Let’s briefly consider now three ways that we experience our triune Lord through his holy Name: by belonging, by praying, and by praising.

One of my favorite Anglicans, the Reverend Austin Farrer, said ‘Belief in the Trinity is not a distant speculation; the Trinity is that blessed family into which we are adopted. God has asked us into his house, he has spread his table before us, he has set out bread and wine.’⁵

You and I were adopted by one God in Three Persons. We were baptized into his threefold Name. Let’s go old school here: your first name is your Christian name. In other words, your personal name, the name you were given in baptism, finds its fulfillment and meaning only by knowing God from the inside—from God dwelling inside you; and you dwelling in the Presence of God. You will never know belonging such as you find when you make your home in the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Take your place at the Table of the Trinity and you will find you are not seated alone, but you are guest with all who confess his Name. Your communion is with God *and* that marvelous mystery called the Church—all sons and daughters of the triune Lord.

³ Lawrence R. Farley, *The Gospel of Matthew: Torah for the Church, The Orthodox Bible Study Companion* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2009), 391.

⁴ *Quote in Olivier Clement, The Roots of Christian Mysticism, 75.*

⁵ Austin Farrer, *The Crown of the Year*, 37.

When you belong to the Trinity, you bear the most precious Spirit of inwardness within you—the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit pours out a multitude of graces so that you feel at home in God; that you find childlike freedom in his presence.

St Gregory was known to speak of the Trinity in his writings as ‘My Trinity.’ Gregory was not speaking like *he owned God*. He spoke in this way because he was a son living freely in his father’s house.

Praying

Secondly we experience our triune God by *praying* his Name. The Name of the Trinity is given to us to pray from our depths to God’s depths.

The beginning of St Patrick’s Breastplate begins and ends with the words:

*I bind unto myself the Name, The strong Name of the Trinity; By invocation of the same.
The Three in One, and One in Three,
Of Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.*

To invoke the Name of the Trinity is to invite his Presence; to reveal his Presence; to make his Presence **real**. I love St Patrick’s confidence in the power of our triune God, ‘*I bind unto myself **the Strong Name** of the Trinity.*’

I remember a story about a woman who asked the Athonite monk St. Paisios, ‘How do I pray when the assault of thoughts won’t end? What do I do when the devil won’t leave me alone?’

St. Paisios said, ‘When the struggle is greatest, cry out ‘Great is the Holy Name of the Trinity!’⁶ I’ve adapted that prayer in my life to say ‘Great is the Holy Name of the Trinity! Lord, save me!’

Our liturgical prayers or sentence prayers—whether they be the Jesus Prayer, St Patrick’s Breastplate, the Sign of the Cross, or any other written—invoke the Presence of God to us. The Sign of the Cross is a silent prayer itself. (Sign of Cross gesture)

These are not prayers, not charms. The Jesus Prayer is not a talisman we summon for magical power. No, we use these prayers to invoke the Presence of the triune God—to reveal his presence, to make his presence real.

The Name of the Trinity is our strong tower, our sure defense, our shelter, our keeper. Or let’s transpose this into the key of St Gregory: My Trinity is my castle. My Trinity is my peace. My Trinity is my peace. Apart from my Trinity I am nothing. With my Trinity, I have all things.

Praising

And this brings us to the third way we experience the Trinity: by *praising* the Name of our triune God. One theologian said the doctrine of the Trinity is ‘not a schoolroom problem, but the song of the Church.’⁷ If the Trinity only engages your brain, you’ll be like I was on the school merry-go-round of my childhood. You spin round and round and when it stops, you can’t see straight or walk straight because you’re so dizzy.

Thanks be to God that we were created and redeemed by a God who transcends our knowledge! From the first apocalypse of God’s Name to Moses as I AM to the fuller revelation of God’s Name as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God is a Mystery! *Our Lord is a Mystery of Unceasing Love!* I will worship Him who is beyond my comprehension, for I am not saved or healed by comprehension, I am saved by grace!

Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who pours out his abundant grace upon us that we, his sons and daughters, would become by grace what He is by nature—a perfect communion of unceasing love.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, the best way to experience the glory of the triune Lord is by singing his glory. Let us sing and smile and be happy. That’s right, I said be happy.

There’s a fascinating truth about our church fathers that goes far too unnoticed. Those fathers who composed sermons, writings, and creeds on the Trinity composed numerous poems and hymns to praise the Lord. In fact, their doxologies were their theologies. There was no separation. Some of our best, most exalted words about God in Three Persons come from ancient hymns and poems, praising our triune Lord.

*Make Thy dazzling rays shine on me, O my Three-Personed God, O Creator, and make of me the temple of Thy inaccessible glory—a luminous temple, blazing and unchanging.*⁸

There are many more examples, but I will close with an ancient doxology appointed for Pentecost:

*Holy God,
who created all things through the Son,
with the co-operation of the Holy Spirit;
Holy Mighty,
through whom we have known the Father,
and through whom the Holy Spirit came into this world;
Holy Immortal,
the Comforting Spirit, who proceeds from the Father,
and abides in the Son;
O Holy Trinity, Glory to you. Glory to you. Glory to you.*⁹

⁷ John A. McGuckin, *Seeing the Glory: Studies in Patristic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Collected Studies of John A. McGuckin* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017), 351.

⁸ *Quoted from Boris Bobrinskoy, The Mystery of the Trinity, 156. Midnight Office of Sunday, Eastern Orthodox Liturgy.*

Amen. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.