

Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a
Psalm 8
2 Corinthians 13:11 - 13
Matthew 28:16 - 20

Trinity: God for us

Trinity Sunday always presents a challenge. It is the only day dedicated to an idea in preference to an event. The idea is: one God in three persons. Many of would be easier to explain the call of Moses, or an event in the life of Jesus than the importance of this idea for Christian faith. Trinity Sunday is not for reflecting on the wonders of this formulation or making something simple more complicated. It is for turning our minds to the wonders of the reality behind the doctrine. As one writer has said the Trinity is the summary of faith, not its premise. The doctrine of the Trinity represents a refinement of Christian theology, developed and articulated over a long period of time as the Church continued to reflect on the meaning of God's love for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. The Trinity is the result of a search for clarity in a context where various threats to faith made it necessary to establish some important parameters for belief in the One God, experienced as transcendent Creator, Incarnate Christ, and enlivening Spirit present among believers.

One of the stages on the road towards refinement, possibly even the starting point for the discussion, is evident in the concluding words of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. These words are similar to those we use as a greeting every Sunday and are the most explicitly Trinitarian formulation in all of Paul's work. But they are not as refined as the words given in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew. Paul does not fit the pattern of speaking first of God, identified as Father, then speaking of the Son, and then the Spirit. Instead Jesus Christ is spoken of first, and is identified as the gracious Lord, rather than the Son. The love of God is mentioned second. This is the only such formulation in the New Testament. No mention is made of the peace of God, which is much more common, or of God as Father. Finally there is a whole essay to be given on the Spirit, linked here with the word communion.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ: For Paul, grace is not a moral quality or virtue, it equates to action and gift - from God to us. Paul chooses to begin his formulation with a reference to an observable event - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth - which has become known as the place where God's love for the world was exercised towards us. The love of God: comes second, because it stands behind this event. God who takes action on our behalf, God who supplies love. If Paul were asked: Who is God? He would reply, God is the loving One who is for us, for our good, even when we were against God. This is the grace - the undeserved favour - we see revealed in Jesus Christ.

The communion of the Holy Spirit: the word used here is *koinwnia* which we usually translate "fellowship". The meaning in this context is subject to discussion, but a reliable interpretation is that it refers to "common participation" or "that which is possessed in common". It is hard to find a word that conveys the best sense here, but

whether we use “fellowship” or “communion” what is intended is not a reflection of human community, it refers to our participation in the Holy Spirit, in the life of God among us. Karl Barth has reformulated this greeting in the following way:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in which the love of God is exercised, and the communion of the Spirit, disclosed and imparted, be with you all.

Paul asks that all three should: be with you all. It is his prayer for the Corinthians. Remember that they lived in a truly diverse city with a strong cultural life and a liberal approach to morality. Paul had heard that the life of the church was being disrupted by conflict between competing groups. A rash of factionalism and self-interested superiority had broken out. Paul’s letters directed the Corinthians back to the basis of their life together: their unity in Christ, who revealed the love of God, and called into being a body of believers made up of many different but interdependent parts. Those parts functioned as intended when they worked together for the common purpose of serving Christ their head. Paul’s Trinitarian benediction concluded exhortations for them to develop a life together that was coherent, harmonious and peaceful. In this context Paul’s prayer that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all was highly significant. He asked that there be a continuation and deepening of the gift of grace God had already awakened among them: that God who is love would supply them the love they needed for the task. That they might continue and deepen their participation in life of God, made present to them through the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s formulation may well have been the starting point for later speculative thinking and formulation of the creeds, but this is not his concern. His focus is with the meaning this benediction has for life as it is meant to be lived in Christian community. His interest in life together - the congregation’s continuing and deepening Participation in the rich gifts God has made available to them.

The doctrine of the Trinity is to help answer the questions - Who is God? And who is God for us? It may help us to know by heart the controversies of the first six centuries, but knowledge of the Trinity is not in the first place intellectual knowledge. It is the knowledge of relationship that is later clarified and expressed in exalted concepts. What matters is that we live in a deepening relationship with the reality they point to: God, the source of love that has graced us in Christ and calls us to live in deepening communion with that love, and one another, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. To live the Trinitarian life is to live ever more deeply in God, whom we have found to be eternally for us, seeking to relate to us, and seeking to have us relate to each other. Deeper participation in this life will, of itself, lead us to be at mission - for that is what God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is: God who is for us, God who is among us, God who seeks to draw the whole world into deeper participation in life based on self-giving love and is coherent, harmonious and peaceful. Trinity Sunday will have served its purpose if, in pausing to reflect on it here, we are taken again into the depths of God’s love for us, and leave with renewed resolve to be part of God’s action in the world.