

Trinity Sunday

“except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Gospel)

You might expect a demonstration of the developed doctrine of the Trinity as the foundation of our faith. But we do not start from the Athanasian Creed (or even the Nicene Creed). These are consequences. The experience of Christian life came first; the attempt to make sense of it second.

What can we say of the Christians of the New Testament? They prayed to the Father. Now most of them were Jews, and so had always prayed to the True God, but the confidence to call God “Father” was new – the relationship had been transformed. They had received the Spirit. This was new again. Yes, there are occasional promises of the gift of the Spirit in the Old Testament, but now it had been received. This was not just a doctrinal theory but the single organising fact of their lives. And they were “in Christ”. Now some Jews had hoped for an “anointed one” of some kind. But the experience of the early Christians was that in Jesus this hope had been fulfilled – and in the process defined. The anointed one had been crucified and the Father had raised him from the dead. His earthly fellowship continued. And all these experienced facts were connected.

Connected not least because the normal way into the Church for several centuries from the New Testament onwards was adult baptism. The candidate had to decide, after instruction in the faith, to reject evil (the world, the flesh and the devil) and to receive baptism into the threefold name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This was no casual decision. It could lead to martyrdom. It was, as the Gospel puts it, being born again. There was a radical break with the past but, much more, the experience of a new life in God, Father, Son and Spirit. This is not a mere human decision; it is God's own intervention, which is why we call baptism a sacrament.

I think a few words from St. Athanasius himself will show how deeply rooted the faith in the Trinity, which is the baptismal life of the Christian, is in the New Testament. This is the faith of one of those who helped the bishops draw up the original Nicene Creed. (Citation BEGINS)

The Father makes all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit, and in that way the unity of the Holy Trinity is preserved. Thus in the Church one God is preached, who is ‘above all things and through all things and in all things’. Yes, certainly, ‘above all things’ as the Father, the first principle and origin; and truly ‘through all things’, that is through the Word, and finally ‘in all things’ in the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 4.6)

When Saint Paul was writing to the Corinthians about spiritual matters, he traced all things back to one God the Father as to the fountain-head in these words: ‘Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord: and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one.’ (1 Cor. 12.4)

The gifts which the Spirit distributes to individuals are given by the Father through the Word. For all things which belong to the Father likewise belong to the Son: so that those things which are given by the Son in the Spirit, are true gifts of the Father. Similarly when the Spirit is in us, the Word by whom we receive him is also in us, and in the Word is also the Father, and this is the meaning of the text: ‘We (that is, my Father and I) will come to him and make our home with him.’ (John 14.23) For where there is light, there also is brilliance, and where there is brilliance, there the power and the glory of the light shines out.

Paul also in the second letter to the Corinthians gives the same teaching in these words: ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.’ (2 Cor. 13.14) For grace and the gift which is given in the Trinity is given by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. For just as grace is given from the Father through the Son, so within us the fellowship in the gift cannot be brought about except in the Holy Spirit. If we have received the Spirit, then we have the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Spirit himself. (Citation ENDS)

We have been born again (or from above – the Greek has both meanings) in baptism. This was not our adult choice, but to remain faithful to the promises made on our behalf is our adult choice. And that is the faith in God, Father, Son and Spirit, active in our lives.