

Trinity Sunday (Year C)

St Mark's, Tampa

30 May 2010

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We live in a strange age. We meet someone casually, at the gym or in line at the supermarket or at a parent-teacher event at school, and we're instantly on a first-name basis. For that matter, if you're like me, you're on a first-name basis with people you've never even actually met. I routinely dash off e-mails to "Kevin" at this university or "Hilary" at that press – people I wouldn't recognize if I ran into them because I've never actually laid eyes on them – and they respond to "Thomas," as though we were old friends.

But how many people do we really *know*? Thanks to facebook, and thanks to that casual American friendliness that lets us jump straight to first names, we know a lot more *about* a lot more people – we know a lot more about what people *do* – and I for one really enjoy that and am grateful for it. But how many people do we really *know*? I'm talking about that deep kind of knowledge that goes beyond merely knowing what people do, the kind that involves knowing who they *are*, getting a glimpse into their inner life, knowing the secret wellspring of their actions, the center from which all the superficial stuff flows. How many people do we really know in *that* way?

Maybe you know your mom or your dad, your husband or wife, a long-standing friend, a sister or brother or son or daughter. But there will not be many, because that kind of knowledge takes time. It takes time, and it's very demanding. We're not ready for it when we've just met someone. Often it takes a lot of struggle. It can take painfully frank conversations, hours of anxiety next to a hospital bed, revelations that cut to the quick.

Jesus says to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." They have spent three years together, and the disciples know something about Jesus, about who he is and what he has done and taught. But they don't *know* him – not yet – and he will soon be leaving them, first for the cross and then for the Father's right hand. And he wants to tell them who he is, to give them a glimpse into his inner life and show them the secret wellspring of his actions, the center from which all else flows. But he can't, because they're not ready. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

This is a good day on which to take stock and ask some hard questions about what kind of friend we have in Jesus. We're on a first-name basis, of course, and perhaps we send him status updates from time to time. But does he still have many things to say to us that we cannot bear, because we have not spent the time with him? Because we haven't put in the struggle, haven't had the painfully frank conversations? Because we haven't made the effort to know him as we know that one person we *really* know – our mom or dad, our husband or wife, that long-standing friend, our sister or brother or son or daughter? Are there at least things that he couldn't tell us before that he can tell us now – things we couldn't bear before, but now, by his grace, we can bear them?

The disciples were not yet ready, Jesus said, to bear the burden that comes from real intimacy with him. His blood as yet unshed and his body as yet unbroken, his wounded hands not yet stretched out in blessing, his place in glory at the Father's side not yet claimed: how could they have borne those things if he had tried to tell them? But they needed to know them – later, when they were ready – and so Jesus assures them that he will send the Holy Spirit: “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.”

So it is the Spirit of truth who enables us to know Jesus more and more, better and better, as we are able to bear it. There has been a tendency lately to speak of the Holy Spirit as if he were a free-lancer – as if the Spirit were constantly bringing new revelations. But that is not how Jesus speaks of the Spirit; it was not even how he spoke of himself. “My teaching is not mine,” he had said, “but his who sent me”; and “I declare to the world what I have heard from” the Father. And just as the Son always declares what he hears from the Father, the Spirit “will speak whatever he hears”; he “will glorify me,” Jesus says, “because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” The Spirit does not strike out on his own, but makes us ready to bear the burden that comes from real intimacy with Jesus.

And now perhaps we can see why this Gospel is so well-chosen for Trinity Sunday. It is not merely that this passage conveniently mentions all three Persons of the Trinity in four short verses. That's handy, but it's not really the point. No, Jesus is speaking here about how we can really get to *know* him in that way that opens to us his inner life, the center from which all else flows; and what Christians have seen as they have come to know Jesus in that way is the Trinity of Persons in Unity of Substance: not an abstract theological speculation, but a glimpse into the very being of God.

This is why I'm not too worried when people make a point of saying that the doctrine of the Trinity isn't found anywhere in Scripture. As the Spirit of truth has led us into all truth, as he has brought Christians more and more deeply into intimacy with Jesus, he has revealed the mystery of the Trinity: that eternal dependence of the Son on the Father, the Son's perfect self-offering back to the Father, and the sending of the Spirit to quicken in us a response to that infinite love, perfectly bestowed and perfectly received. Small wonder if the first Christians had not yet come to that understanding, to set it down with careful logic and in rigorous formulations. The Word did not become flesh and dwell among us to teach a really awesome version of Systematic Theology 101, but so that we could behold his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, and so that to all who receive him, who believe on his Name, he could give power to become children of God.

So, as I say, I'm not too worried when people say that the doctrine of the Trinity isn't found anywhere in Scripture. Not worried – but maybe a little annoyed, because we find hints of the doctrine everywhere. In our first reading today, we hear about wisdom, who was “set up . . . before the beginning of the earth,” who was there when God “established the heavens” and “made firm the skies above” and “marked out the foundations of the earth.” This treatment of Wisdom – Wisdom with a capital W, personified as God's companion in creation – is clearly an early sketch of the doctrine of the Word, who “was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” And look at the epistle: Paul is not trying to penetrate into the deepest mysteries of God's inner being, but simply talking about the experience of redemption – and yet that experience has a recognizably Trinitarian structure: the Lord Jesus Christ reconciles us to the Father – “since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” – and awakens God's love in us by “pour[ing] it into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

So the doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract theological speculation. And when Jesus says that the Spirit will lead us into all truth, he doesn't mean that the Spirit will show us how to solve ever-more-complex logical puzzles. He means that the Spirit will make us ready to know Jesus more and more, so that we can bear to hear the things that he longs to tell us, to get a glimpse into that life by which the Son eternally glorifies the Father, who has given him all things, and sends forth the Spirit of truth to awaken in us the love that honors him who justifies us and reconciles us to the Father. And so to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the Holy and Undivided Trinity, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*