

This Sunday's Readings – Holy Trinity – Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity. The concept of three persons in one is one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. It is almost impossible not only to explain but also to comprehend. However, the proof is in the Bible. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this introduction to today's readings – “The doctrine of the Trinity, as distinct from triadic formulas and the triadic structure of the biblical experience of God, is implicit rather than explicit in Scripture. What is true of the New Testament, namely, that the Spirit brings believers to faith in Jesus as the one in whom God has acted, is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Old Testament. We see this in the theophany that is the subject of today's first reading”.

The first reading is from the Book of Exodus. This event occurs right after the Israelites made and worshiped the golden calf. Moses came down from Mt Sinai with the first set of tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments and smashed the tablets in anger when he saw them worshipping a golden idol. God then directed Moses to cut two more stone tablets and bring them to the top of Mt. Sinai where God would write the Ten Commandments again. In this reading God, descending in a cloud, addresses Himself as “Lord”. However, what is even more important here is that the “Lord” describes Himself as “a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity”. This is the God that we know, a Father who cares for and protects His children just as He cared for and protected the Israelites. It is also interesting to note that God addresses Himself as “Lord” three times. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains the theophany that he mentioned in his introduction above – “The first paragraph speaks of the theophany itself (YHWH's proclamation of his name), while the second paragraph relates Moses' response to this theophany. Later Judaism would have boggled somewhat at the suggestion that YHWH himself “descended” and “passed before [Moses]” in making this proclamation. Such crudely anthropomorphic ideas seemed inconsistent with YHWH's transcendence. Accordingly, various intermediaries were proposed as the agencies of divine revelation—angels, the *memra* (word) or the Logos, the wisdom or the Spirit of YHWH. These intermediaries paved the way for the Christian understanding of the incarnation and the Trinity. In revelation—whether the revelation of Sinai or the revelation in the Christ-event—the transcendent Deity goes forth in self-communication out of the depths of his own being. He also creates the response to his self-revelation. This is the triadic pattern of events that we find in the story of the theophany on Mount Sinai: (1) YHWH in his own essential being; (2) YHWH going out of himself in self-communication; (3) YHWH creating within the heart of Moses the response to this self-communication. This triadic pattern corresponds to the New Testament formulation of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is important for the Christian understanding of the Old Testament that YHWH is not to be equated with the first Person of the Trinity in Christian doctrine but with all three Persons. Or, in the words of the so-called Athanasian Creed (note that YHWH-Lord!):

The Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet there are not three Lords but one Lord.”

The second reading is the conclusion of the 2nd Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, which was written at approximately 55 AD. Note that the Corinthians are to greet one another with “a holy kiss”, which is the same as the “sign of peace” during the Mass. However, what is much more important here is one of the clearest references to the Holy Trinity in the New Testament – “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you”. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment – “There are several places in Paul’s letters where a triadic understanding of Christian experience is presupposed (for example, [1 Corinthians 12:4-6](#)), but only here does Paul deliberately use a triadic formula”. In the Gospels, there are many references to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit from Jesus.

In today’s Gospel reading from John, we see another reference. One of the main reasons why John wrote his Gospel was to show beyond a doubt that Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father, are one and the same. This reading is part of the discourse that Jesus had with Nicodemus, which is unique to the Gospel of John. The first line (John 3:16) from the Gospel is probably one of the most recognizable and most famous lines in all the Gospels – “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son”. This entire reading is a direct quote of Jesus to Nicodemus. Note that Jesus always speaks in the third person, not in the first person – “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it”. Also the Greek root for “condemn” means both judgement and condemnation. Those who believe in Jesus are saved while those who do not believe in Jesus have “already been condemned”. Throughout this reading, the Son and the Father are one. Later on in John’s Gospel during the Last Supper discourse Jesus promises that the Father “will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:16-17). The Trinity is complete.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these cultural comments on today’s readings – “Bumper stickers and personalized license plates inscribed “John 3:16” are a common sight on highways across the United States. One can only wonder if the contemporary Christian who proudly broadcasts this heart-warming message (“For God so loved the world . . .”) realizes that it reflects only one phase in the life, loves, and hates of the first-century Johannine community. John’s Gospel expresses both a positive and negative attitude toward the “world.” The positive attitude is clear in today’s passage and elsewhere in the Gospel (1:29; 4:42; 6:33, 51; 10:36; 12:47; 17:21). Jesus is actually glad to “come into the world” (6:32; 11:27). He is the “light of this world” (8:12; 9:5; 12:46) who willingly became human and pitched his tent among us (1:14). The negative attitude is actually more common. The world refused to receive Jesus (1:9-10) and is basically at odds with him (16:20; 17:14, 16; 18:36) and his Spirit (14:17; 16:8-11). In fact, the world positively hates Jesus and his followers (7:7; 15:18-19; 16:20). In response, Jesus determines to judge the world (9:39; 12:31) because the sons of darkness live in it (12:35-36). He prosecutes the world as its judge (8:21-29). Later, the Paraclete will carry on the formal trial and convict the world of false righteousness, false judgment, and submission to the devil (16:8-11). How are we to understand the mixture of these positive and negative attitudes and the coexistence of strong love and deep-rooted hatred in John’s community long after Jesus departed this

world? From a historical perspective, scholars acknowledge that John's community went through stages of development. In its earliest stage (mid 50s), this community saw the world as a good place but in need of reform. It needed and deserved evangelization. For the most part, Mediterranean Judean believers in Jesus attracted other Mediterranean Judeans to believe in Jesus. At a slightly later stage (late 80s), some Judean audiences began to turn a deaf ear to the preaching and soon took measures to eject fellow believers in Jesus from the synagogues. This shocking experience stimulated the development of the negative attitude toward the "world." In John's Gospel, chapters 5-12 indicate that the resistant and unbelieving "world" involves "some hostile and disbelieving Judeans." But chapters 14-17 reflect the period after the break between early Christians and the synagogue. At the same time, some of the Gentiles who joined the community began to disbelieve its claims. They were also included in this negative perception of "the world."

THE WAYS OF AN ANTISOCIAL GROUP

A cultural perspective sheds yet additional light on our Johannine ancestors in the faith. The shock of "excommunication" transformed John's community into an "antisocial group." This technical term describes a group that sets itself up in a society as a conscious alternative to the larger society. Social scientists observe that this posture is always transitional (even if the transition takes a couple of hundred years). This group's use of the word "the world" (seventy-nine times in John compared to nine times in Matthew and three times each in Luke and Mark) is a clear indicator of the "us" versus "them" mentality. Such peculiar use of language characterizes all antisocial groups. This strategy sharply separates the group from larger society but binds the group members into tight-knit relationships among themselves and with their founder. John uses a wide variety of synonyms to encourage and express this bonding: believing in Jesus; following him; abiding in him; loving him; keeping his word; etc. As the Johannine scholar Raymond Brown notes; such activity can persuade believers to retreat from "the world" into their warm cocoon of life or inspire them to go forth and evangelize "the world." He criticizes the former as a "fortress mentality" but warns that the latter is a "naive" view. All believers must come to grips with disagreement and rejection and devise constructive rather than self-defeating responses to both".

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