

Trinity Sunday 2012: God's mission – and ours

Genesis ch1 (excerpts including 1:26); 2 Corinthians 13:11-13;

Matthew 28:16-20

The excerpts from the very familiar and apparently simple story we heard from Genesis, contain some fundamental assertions about God just a few of which I want to draw out briefly before turning to our Gospel text on this Trinity Sunday.

So what is being said about God in this genesis story?

The Jewish background to talking about God – rich and relational

Firstly, that God is *separate* from his creation, not part of it. God is there before the beginning.

Secondly, God is the *one* God who creates and that the Spirit of God, or “the wind from God” (as the New Revised Version puts it), is involved in the creative process.

Thirdly, that God does this *intentionally*. The world about us is an expression of God's creativity, not an accident or random event, or the result of struggle between gods, but something which comes into being effortlessly because God wants it – the creation is an expression of God's desire.

Fourthly, this creativity of God involves not only God's Spirit, but God's Word: The Spirit sweeps across the waters. God speaks and it happens. God's Word and Spirit work powerfully in unison.

Fifthly, God is *relational* – both within himself and with us, and our

relational nature reflects this: In the last part of the poem, it is stated twice that *adam* was created in God's image and a third time that *adam* was created "male and female." Exactly the same pattern is found later in Genesis 5:1 The singular *adam* is created as a plurality, "male and female".

Looked at from the other end, as it were, the *one* God created *adam* through an expression of God's plurality. The phrase, "Let *us* make *adam* in *our* image", is deliberate and in its setting expresses a radical understanding not just of what it means to be human, but of the very nature of God.

Put differently again, the divine plurality expressed in this verse, is as an anticipation of the human plurality of the man and woman, but it also casts the human relationship between man and woman in the role of reflecting God's own personal relationship with himself. So, when we read later that man and woman though separate are made to cling to each other in deep unity, this is telling us something of the unity and diversity of God.

These opening verses of the bible and the principles they embody, then, form the very Jewish background of our understanding of who God is and what this means for us. Jews were strict monotheists, but there is room in that monotheism for understanding God in *rich* and *relational* terms.

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Language, Theology and Experience

Jesus talked a lot about God as his Father. This was not unique to Jesus but it certainly characterised his understanding of God. Jesus also talked a lot about the Spirit when he talked about God, just as we have heard

today the Epistle writers, such as Paul, also did. This seems to be the language they needed to use when they spoke of God. They had no full blown doctrine of the Trinity, they simply had language that expressed their experience, especially their experience of Jesus.

In our Gospel for today we read that, “when they saw him, they worshipped him”.¹ Luke also uses the same phrase in his account of Jesus’ ascension.² Moreover, this isn’t the only time Matthew talks of worshipping Jesus and not just the resurrected Jesus³: in that strange story of Peter’s attempt to walk on water and Jesus calming the sea, the awestruck and terrified disciples also “worshipped him”.⁴

It took several centuries for the early Christians to come up with a full blown doctrine of the Trinity. Even then, Eastern and Western traditions don’t fully agree in their creedal statements. Yet, Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians is dated in the mid fifties, just some twenty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection and Matthew’s Gospel could well have been completed not too many years after that.

In any case, at a very early stage, the primitive church was clearly using language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and associating this with a natural impulse to bow down before Jesus as God – something that as good Jews they knew full well they did only to the one true God who brought them out of bondage – salvation, deliverance, liberation, was *God’s* work. Clearly, they understood that was what *Jesus* was doing for them. So the talk of the *Spirit* and the *Father* in the same breath as *worshipping Jesus* happened as they gave voice to their experience of

¹ Matthew 28:17.

² Luke 24:52.

³ As in Matthew 28:9.

⁴ Matthew 14:33.

Jesus.

This line of thought is continued in the Gospel text: Jesus announces that “*all* authority” – that is *God’s* authority – has been given to him and commissions the disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of [that is, submersing them into], the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”.⁵

Jesus was about the work of God, and that work is about bringing salvation for all. In reporting their encounter, the disciples are not interested in using the language of Greek metaphysics or struggling with creedal formulas; they simply speak of the powerful, creating, saving, liberating, dying and rising, ruling, living God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – who would have them become part of his mission to redeem his creation.

This, then, was their understanding of making disciples. So too must it be ours. As John would later summarise it: “...as the Father has sent me, so also, I send you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “receive the Holy Spirit”.⁶

Amen!

⁵ Matthew 28:19.

⁶ John 20:21-22.

