Trinity Sunday

Mattins	Genesis 1; Matthew 3
Introit	Psalm 67
Epistle	Revelation 4
Gospel	John 3:1-15
Evensong	Genesis 18; 1 John 5

EPISTLE AND GOSPEL

Theological discussion about the Trinity often addresses what the three-in-one God *is*. The historic one-year lectionary in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer points us in another direction: the readings for Trinity Sunday disclose this mystery to us by fastening our attention on what the Trinity *does*. The epistle and gospel are not prooftexts listing the persons of the Trinity. The historic one-year lectionary teaches the doctrine of the Trinity by showing rather than telling.

The gospel for this Sunday is old, older than Trinity Sunday itself. That is a clue to understanding it. Before there was a Trinity Sunday – not universally observed in the Western Church until the fourteenth century – this Sunday continued the celebration of Pentecost. In technical terms, it was the octave of Pentecost. For that purpose, John 3:1-15 was a fitting gospel, because it emphasizes the Spirit's regenerative work in baptism, as well as the uncontainable, untamable quality of the Spirit of God and those born of that Spirit – they are like the wind, which "blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from" (John 3:8 NRSVue).

Yet the gospel works equally well as a teaching about what the Trinity does. It begins with the question of Jesus's teaching and miracles – are these the works of a man, or the works of God? To answer that question, Jesus turns to the works of the Spirit, especially the new birth. From there the gospel moves to the work of the Son of Man, who would be "lifted up" on the cross. In Jesus Christ held up and displayed as an

object – not only of scorn, but of faith – we see what God does in the world. The works of Jesus and the works of the Holy Spirit are indeed the works of God.

The reading appointed for the epistle is Revelation 4, a vision of the divine throne room. The seer perceives the voice of Jesus and finds himself "in the Spirit," as he has a vision of God sitting on a heavenly throne. The reading describes the worship of God – splendid and mysterious, with worship given by "four living creatures emblematic of the whole domain of living beings"[1] along with twenty-four elders who symbolize the people of God (possibly, just possibly, the twelve tribes of Israel joined with the twelve apostles).

In many ways this epistle is a counterpoint to the gospel. In the gospel, God is active in the world, doing things; in the epistle, God is seated, outside the world, receiving praise. In the gospel, attention is on redemption; in the epistle, the praise is for creation and existence. Hearing the gospel, the listener experiences an insistent particularity, a conversation between a Jewish rabbi and a Jewish inquirer one night in first-century Jerusalem; hearing the epistle, the listener ascends to a timeless plane outside of human experience. The conversation in the gospel is in hushed tones and held in secret; the epistle offers a sensory overload of light and lightning, white robes and rainbows, burning lamps and flapping wings, lions and eagles oh my!

The question right on the surface of Revelation 4 is who is being worshiped. Some interpreters have identified the one seated on the throne as Jesus Christ. But the text points to a different answer. The ample borrowing from the visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah is clearly meant to suggest to us that this recipient of praise is the one God of the Hebrew Bible,[2] "the Lord God Almighty" (Revelation 4:8). In the next chapter, the God who receives this praise will be joined by a Lamb who also receives praise. At first the Lamb is not seen (Revelation 5:1-3) and then is seen near the throne and among the elders (5:6); then the Lamb takes the scroll from the one sitting on the throne (5:7). These two recipients of praise, God and the Lamb, are not presented as identical in the vision of Revelation 4-5, yet there is an identity of praise, for both are declared

"worthy" to receive adulation: God, for creation (chapter 4); the Lamb, for redemption (chapter 5).

The reading for the epistle is another depiction of the work of the Trinity: the seer is summoned through the voice of Jesus, transported by the Spirit, and given a vision of resplendent praise for the enthroned Lord God Almighty. The throne room of God, not the throne room of the Roman emperor, is the locus of sovereignty.

Praise is the proper response to the work of the Trinity. This response matches the beginning of the Athanasian Creed, which is always used on this Sunday. J. N. D. Kelly, an Anglican theologian and authority on the creeds, noted: "So far from suggesting that Christian faith is no more than intellectual assent, [the Athanasian Creed] starts off by affirming that it consists in *worshipping* the divine Trinity."[3] By calling for worship, Trinity Sunday is not only an appropriate beginning for the second half of the church year, but it is also a fitting culmination of the first half.

The introit also calls for this response: "Let the peoples praise thee, O God; * yea, let all the peoples praise thee" (v. 3).

PROPER LESSONS

Trinity Sunday is a rare day that has a full set of proper lessons. Nothing, as it were, is left to chance. The first lesson at Mattins is Genesis 1. For readers who bring to the text their late-modern preoccupations and frames of reference, this chapter is often misread as being about – and antagonistic to – the sciences of cosmology, geology, and biology. But it is centrally about God, and how God is different from the putative deities of the ancient world. That focus of attention makes Genesis 1 especially appropriate for this Sunday that is about the doctrine of God.

It not impossible that this reading was included on the theory that Genesis 1:26 is a Trinitarian prooftext. It is more likely, though, that "Let us make man" is either a Hebrew plural of "self-deliberation or determination,"[4] or else an announcement by God to the heavenly court or divine council (cf. Genesis 3:22; Job 2:1; Psalm 29:1; Psalm 82:6; Psalm 89:6; Daniel 7:10).[5] Note that an announcement to the heavenly

court in Genesis 1 would correspond with the heavenly court in Revelation 4, the reading for the epistle.

A central idea in this first creation account is that the Deity is distinct and separate from the world. "Unlike other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts, the world in Genesis 1 is no longer filled with gods – the text deliberately excludes the idea that any piece of the cosmos is divine, including sea, earth, sky, and heavenly bodies."[6] Although it has become fashionable among some commentators to say that the first creation account is about making the earth to be a temple, to the contrary, "there is no clear sense that God dwells in this cosmic structure, indicating again a distinction between the natural world and God."[7] That lack of divine residence has important implications for the encounter of God and humanity. Within the Hebrew Bible those implications have to do with the centrality of the tabernacle and the temple, while for Christian readers those implications are centered on Jesus Christ. It is not in creation, but in the incarnation, that we find our *Emmanuel*, God with us.

That is exactly where the remaining lessons lead us. Matthew 3 shows the three persons of the Trinity at work in the incarnation: Jesus Christ is emerging from the waters of the Jordan River, the Spirit is descending like a dove, and the Father speaks: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17 KJV). Here we see and we hear what Ann Loades called the "exchange of love and generosity at the heart of the divine."[8] Note that because the entire chapter is read, it includes John the Baptist's threat that the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire – connecting Pentecost and Trinity Sunday.

Genesis 18 is a mysterious passage in which there are three visitors to Abraham and Sarah, and the narrator tells us that it was "the LORD" who appeared to Abraham (18:1). In context, Genesis 18 pairs with Genesis 19, the destruction of Sodom and rescue of Lot, with marked parallels "in the two hospitality scenes (18:1-8; 19:1-3) and in the pleas for the two cities (18:23-32; 19:18-22)."[9] But when Genesis 18 alone is read on Trinity Sunday, the three visitors are taken to suggest the Trinity, and again our entrance into this doctrine is not through what the Trinity is but through what the Trinity does – visitation in blessing and in judgment, with the righteousness and justice of God as a constraint on

the exercise of judgment. The incarnational themes of John 3 and Matthew 3 are prefigured, for the visitors meet Abraham and Sarai amid their tents, eating their food and hearing their laughter, and God allows Abraham to go several rounds with him, with no TKO, in their negotiations over the fate of Lot's city.

The readings for the day conclude with 1 John 5. In the King James Version there is an addition that teaches the Trinity in very explicit terms (marked here in italics): "For there are three that bear record *in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth,* the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one" (1 John 5:7-8 KJV). That addition is called "the Johannine Comma." It does not appear in any of our oldest Greek manuscripts, and the Bible translations from the last two hundred years do not include it in the text. Today scholars recognize that "beyond any shadow of doubt" these words were not part of the epistle.[10] In the sixteenth century, however, the Johannine Comma may have been a reason that Archbishop Matthew Parker, the compiler of the Sunday lessons, included the lesson for Trinity Sunday. Or not – Archbishop Parker was a humanist scholar, and he knew that the greatest humanist and textual critic of the time, Erasmus, already recognized that the verse was an interpolation and not part of the text.

Whatever may have been the motivations for selecting 1 John 5, it still provides a magnificent conclusion to the day's readings about the Trinity. This chapter repeatedly emphasizes the work of God in and through the Son and the Spirit. In the words of Ben Witherington, a New Testament scholar, "While most Trinitarian discussion in the NT is implicit at best, here it begins to become more explicit because we begin to get rather clear-cut divisions of labour in regard to what Father, Son, and Spirit do, even though they all testify to the same truth."[11] As is typical in the Book of Common Prayer, the final reading on the great festivals is about the ethical implications. Those who are born of God (an echo of the gospel) will love God and follow his unburdensome commandments (vv. 1-3); they have boldness to pray for their brothers and sisters caught in undeadly sins (vv. 14-16); they keep themselves from idols (v. 21).

1 John 5 brings together themes of the gospel and the epistle: those who are born of God are the ones who overcome. Heaven, the scene of the reading for the epistle, is throughout the Apocalypse the place of the triumphant martyrs. Read at the close of the day, 1 John 5 is riffing on the paired expressions we have already heard, "water and Spirit" (gospel) and "Spirit and fire" (Mattins second lesson), adding "the Spirit and the water and the blood." And this lesson gives a resounding answer to the questions Nicodemus struggles with in the gospel – who is Jesus, and whose works is he doing? He is the Son of God, and this is the testimony of God himself, echoing the Father's "This is my beloved Son." In his works, we see the works of God.

HYMNS

Mattins 1	All creatures of our God and king
Mattins 2	When John baptized at Jordan's river
Epistle	Holy, holy, holy!
Gospel	Thou, whose almighty word
Evensong 1	Great is thy faithfulness
Evensong 2	Father, Lord of all creation

ENDNOTES

1 John T. Carroll, "Between Text & Sermon: Revelation 4:1-11," Interpretation, vol. 63 (2009), 57-58.

2 Christopher T. Holmes, *Unspoiled Endings: Reclaiming the Book of Revelation from Misuse and Neglect* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 85. The twelfth-century scholar-bishop Nerses of Lambron notes the absence of physical description of the one seated on the throne: "Now because this vision signifies the Father, it did not take a corporeal form concerning him . . . but depicts him in accordance with precious stones." Nerses of Lambron, *Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John*, translated by Robert W. Thomson (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) (Hebrew University Armenian Studies 9), 69.

3 J. N. D. Kelly, The Athanasian Creed (London: A. and C. Black, 1964), 125-126.

4 See Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44.

5 See Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 27-28.

6 Ronald Hendel, *Genesis 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024), 145; see also Arnold, *Genesis*, 46.

7 Hendel, *Genesis 1–1*, 145.

8 Ann Loades, "Finding New Sense in the 'Sacramental,'" in *The Gestures of God: Explorations in Sacramentality*, edited by Geoffrey Rowell and Christine Hall (London: Continuum, 2004), 162.

9 Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16–50* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 44.

10 I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 236. For a definitive account of the history of this addition, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John, Volume 30: Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), appendix IV.

11 Ben Witherington III, "The Trinity in the Johannine Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, edited by Emery Gilles and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77. Although not all readers will follow his conclusions, in explicating the witness of "water," Witherington discusses the baptism of Jesus and John 3—both of which appear in other proper readings for the day. Ibid., 75-76.