

Sermon: Paul's God, Jesus and Holy Spirit

Trinity Sunday. Heady stuff. I'll recall for you (from previous years) that this observance is a 14th Century development in the Church's celebration of the liturgical year; and it is the *only* Sunday when the Church celebrates *a doctrine*.

This "Doctrine of the Trinity" is undergirded by a series of church councils (in the centuries after Christianity became the religion of the Empire, under Constantine) [... councils] generating creeds, all of them working to defend against positions of their time being identified and rooted out as heretical. The First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE opposed a significant number of theologians and believers (the priest Arius the named leader among them) who held that Jesus was *not* co-eternal with God the Father but, rather, a **creation** of God before time. In disagreement, the Council defined that Jesus was of exactly the *same essence* and **substance** as the Father ... Jesus was God of God.

The Council of Constantinople in 381 CE **made *heretical*** multiple ideas and movements. Thomas Aquinas – theologian and historian – provides us a summary:

- The phrase (in that Council's creed) stating that "[Jesus], for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven", was to refute the error of [Origen](#), "who alleged that by the power of Christ's Passion even the devils were to be set free."
- The phrase stating Jesus was "[made] *incarnate by the Holy Spirit*" was to refute the [Manicheans](#) "so that we may believe that He assumed true flesh and not a phantastic body,"
- The phrase stating that "[Jesus] *came down from Heaven*" was to refute the error of [Photius](#), "who asserted that Christ was no more than a man."

- Finally, the phrase “*and He was made man*” was to “exclude the error of [Nestorius](#), according to whose contention the Son of God ... would be said to dwell *in* man [rather] than to *be* man.”

- [Nicene Creed - Wikipedia](#)

Regarding the Holy Spirit, this 381 CE Creed declared – *following* its statements about “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty ...” and “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ ...” – [the Creed declared], “[we believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified ...”.

It is 2½ centuries later that the Athanasian Creed elevated the Holy Spirit ‘all the way’, saying the Spirit is of the same essence and substance as Father and Son.

I trot out all this philosophical stuff because even though we Baptists are non-credal folk – ‘sola scriptura’ (“Scripture alone!”) believers – it *tends* to be that we nonetheless live and believe and teach in the same historically generated ‘credal atmosphere’: worshipping one God existing in three coequal, coeternal, consubstantial divine persons.

Which belief is fine, and if that is how you ground your faith I’m not-at-all seeking to move you. But this ‘sola scriptura’ Baptist preacher (right alongside others within ‘sola scriptura’ Reformation traditions) has a duty to point out other possibilities; because, indeed, there are multiple *biblical* theologies to explore and consider. This morning, the Lectionary having handed us the short passage read from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, I seek for us to hear the apostle Paul’s thinking, preaching and writing about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

A first important point concerns not just Paul but all biblical authors: They write *not* trying to **define** the divine (as those later Councils did) *but*, rather, to express and extol **what they have experienced** of the divine.

To today's passage, then: Interestingly and importantly, Paul had never been to the church in Rome; it was founded by un-named others. Paul tells the congregation how he *has* longed and *does* long to come to them; indeed he plans to do so on his way to Spain after, first, taking a collection from churches he himself established back to the Jerusalem church which is in difficulty and need. However, it won't be the case that he stays long in Rome when he, God willing!, gets there; for Paul explains he only exercises such residency with churches he himself has founded. Paul's calling – his mission – is to major cities of the Empire (i) containing an Israelite population (therefore a synagogue), (ii) who have not yet been introduced to God's 'innovation' to Israelite faith which is Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

The next point will likely 'shake up' what-it-is you've previously thought when reading or hearing Paul ... it surely has redefined my understanding!: Stick with Paul in his focus which is on the believers-in-Jesus (the "church") within the synagogue in Rome. That synagogue, and hence the subset church, [they] are mostly made up Israelites in two categories: (1) Those who have been in the metropolitan Greco-Roman city perhaps for generations but in any case have been enculturated into the Greco-Roman world. They have let lapse the Torah's strict purity code – the rules about kosher food and about business and social relationships with non-Israelites, even the requirement for male circumcision (which would be stigmatizing when in a Roman bath). (You might remember, here, that we read about this Hellenist party in the Gospel accounts.) Paul's shorthand is to call them "the Greeks". (2) The second category of Israelite is those who *are* religiously observant of Pharisaic Judaism ... all the Torah requirements. Whether directly come from Judea or not, Paul calls these people "the Judaeans".

Now let this sink in and truly register, people!; because – for centuries – translators have thrown us off a correct understanding by writing "Jew" where Paul wrote "Judean" (in the original Greek, Ἰουδαῖος).

Accordingly, we have had to read Paul to say such things as “[The Gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the **Jew** first and also to the Greek” as though he is distinguishing Israelite from Gentile where, actually, he is addressing (in that quote) “the Judean Israelite first and also the Greek Israelite” (... the two subsets of Israelites). This makes a huge difference in our understanding of Paul!

The third ‘category of humanity’ for Paul is “Gentile”, meaning non-Israelite. There exist some of these Gentiles in Rome who have been attracted to the God of Israel and are joined into the synagogue; and there are some (a few) who are joined into the subset Jesus-group (the church within the synagogue). Paul briefly refers to Gentile Christians in the letter to the Romans, describing them as wild olive shoots grafted in to share the rich root of the tree ... grafted into places abandoned by Israelites when they have rejected the Gospel of God (the innovation which is Jesus’ life, death and resurrection). The function of those few Gentile believers in God’s overall plan, says Paul, is to make the non-believing Israelites jealous so that they ‘catch on’ or ‘wake up’ and ‘get on board’ with God’s means for their salvation, meaning their Day-of-the-Lord resurrection (following Jesus’ resurrection) into an Israelite theocracy reigning over all the earth.

<Pause>

The main point of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is to address the relationship between Judaeans and Greek Christians (the two Israelite groups within the church). That material is for another sermon(!).

The portion of the letter which is today’s lection, for Trinity Sunday, is read today because it shows us a glimpse of Paul’s thinking concerning God, Jesus and the Spirit.

God, for Paul – Paul himself still and staunchly a Pharisee (a Judeo-Christian Pharisee) – [God] is the one and only god above all that is. In

the near-Eastern socio-economic world view, God is patron over everything-that-is. Jesus' function is as broker (*of* God-the-patron) *on behalf of* God's preeminent client Israel. The situation being addressed by Jesus is dire because Israel ***has not***, and clearly (across all Israel's history!) ***cannot*** fulfill its covenant-with-God requirements. But 'covenant terms' *absolutely* need to be satisfied! Paul preaches that Jesus ***makes*** satisfaction (within the covenant's sacrificial system) by his obedience ***unto*** death. Jesus's resurrection, akin to the human firstborn who opens the mother's womb for all who follow, [his resurrection] then saves Israel: Israelites who follow (by believing in Jesus' resurrection) are utilizing God's means – God's innovation – for Israel's salvation.

... This summarizes what Paul preaches about God and God's Gospel (... and do note that, for Paul, this is the Gospel of God, not of Jesus Christ; God is the 'doer'.)

Jesus, the obedient human broker, is rewarded by God: In his resurrection and ascension he is named Christ ("the name above every name") and is seated/positioned/honoured at the right hand of God. (Note in distinction how Mark's Jesus becomes Christ / Son of God at his baptism; Matthew's and Luke's Jesus becomes Christ at his conception; and for the Gospel writer John he is "the Word" in the beginning with God.)

The **Spirit**, for Paul, is – simply put – God's activity, God-at-work. (1) It empowered and directed the prophets of old; (2) it enlivened Jesus; (3) it provides Paul his altered state of consciousness visions (both the Damascus Road one which was his "call" narrative, and those visions continuing to empower his life and ministry); and (4) this Holy Spirit is what is active in *the altered state of consciousness encounters with the resurrected and ascended Jesus* that are characteristic of all Christians of that era. We hear this forthrightly a few verses after today's reading (... verses actually read last week). *In* 8:26 – "... the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that

very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” *and in* vv. 15b ff. (read today): “When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”

<Pause>

The mind and the belief of Paul are clearly not those of the Councils of the Empire as expressed in their evolving creeds. Which, for sola scriptura Christians, is liberating; but let me briefly offer a final historical point in order to highlight just how freeing this is. When Christianity, with its philosophically-honed creedal statements of orthodoxy came to the period known as the Enlightenment, “Faith” for the large part took a terrible turn. “Believing” became a cognitive test instead of a relational experience. If one could bring one’s mind to accept, and one’s mouth to utter, what pre-Enlightenment heresy-hunters had to say about God, Jesus and the Spirit, in spite of the Enlightenment’s blossoming-of-thinking about these things and everything else, then ‘one’ was told they were going to heaven while the rest of humanity was going to hell. Paul, Peter, James, Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, John of Patmos and the other New Testament writers all fail this test(!), as do I and any other sola scriptura Christian able to get beneath and untangled from the machinations of Christianity-as-religion-of-the-Empire.

What to declare as Good News, then, on Trinity Sunday, 2024?: **God** – Creator, Provider, Saviour – *is beyond conceptualizing* let alone defining. The Bible – Old Testament and New – tells the story of Israel’s relationship-to-God as God’s chosen people. The New Testament – (i) beginning with Peter’s experiences (remember the Cornelius story?) and, (ii) across its timeline, increasingly inferring from its memories of Jesus’ actions and words – [the New Testament] opens God’s covenanting to the world.

Jesus, (i) whose bringing-to-the-center all those whom dominion-makers would push aside – loving, forgiving, healing and restoring them; (ii) whose taking-to-task of the dominion-makers was brilliant and irrefutable; (iii) whose integrity was made complete/“perfect” when death was its immediate outcome; and (iv) whose dying has been *answered* by generations upon generations *of experience*, starting the first Easter Sunday morning, that “He lives” ... **this one** I and you honour above any other one who has walked the earth, and therefore we follow in his Way.

And the Holy Spirit? Whether in a rare mountain-top experience, some extraordinary vision, the persistent nudging of night dreams, or the feedback received by way of symptoms (personal, familial, societal even global symptoms), [in all these ways and more] we are encountered by something way bigger than us, something far beyond our control. Our tradition calls the experience Holy Spirit. That works.

What is left to say, this Trinity Sunday?: Glory be to God. Honour *above every other name* be to Jesus, the Christ. Thanksgiving be to the Spirit, God-at-work in *and* amongst us *and* wherever we turn. Amen.

Prayer for the Offering

God, we worship You with mind and heart and soul because – by the work of the Holy Spirit – we stand **on** the shoulders of saints in Christ before us, and **within** the embrace of saints in Christ around us; and we have come to know that Jesus’ Way is Truth and Life ... it is You at work, God, for salvation. And this is not just a personal salvation, it is for the salvation of this world that is so endangered (*climatically, environmentally, geophysical-ly, biologically, socially, politically, militarily, economically, medically endangered*) by human greed. Here, and through on-line or posted offerings, in a movement mindfully counter to greed, we present monetary resources which – together with our dedicated works in many-and-various spheres – we present and dedicate to the Way of Jesus. In his name, Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We offer thanksgiving and, as well, our prayers for the world. We shall pray.

Creator, Provider, Saviour God, Ground of our Being, we declare our awe concerning the magnificent and far-flung universe *of galaxies, stars, planets and every other celestial phenomenon*, and – in particular – our gratitude for this blue-green-brown-and-white jewel which is our home in the midst of it all. When we *feel* the sun's warmth and *see* by its light; when we breathe the air, which – each breath! – connects us to *all* life; when we drink the water that rains down, gushes up, and flows out to sustain all life, we know ourselves to be held in the palm of your hand. When we recognize how there is enough of what-is-needed for the whole 'great diversity' of your creation to thrive, we are seeing not only your glorious design but also the ingloriousness of humanity's terrible, ongoing, indeed growing failure to let it be so.

This day we lift up before you the nations of this world facing the greatest food and water insecurity: **Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gaza, Haiti, Mali, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen**. We lift up the millions in danger of starvation in **South Africa**. We lift up before you the war-torn nations of **Ukraine, Gaza, Ethiopia, and Syria** – and every nation in which conflict rages, disrupting life, bringing both death and destruction.

Hear, O God, our prayers for the leaders of the nations and the tycoons in global commerce, that they may be moved toward action for peace, toward compassion, toward taking responsibility and away from one-up-manship and power struggles and greed, from anything which divides instead of unites, from anything which disrupts rather than ensures your provision of resource for all your creation.

We pray, within our immediate sphere, for people and situations we are 'part of'. There are those whom we together, *as a community*, uphold: (i) Barb and her family as they mourn for her mom; (ii) Mair & Denny (and family) as they grieve Fin, Mair's sister. We lift before You Susan's sister Beverly as she finds her way within a recently-diagnosed life-limiting condition. We likewise call to mind others that are sick: Shirley's sister Barb, Susan's and Pat's friends Linda and Ryan, Monica's cousin Shelly and niece Lyanne, Liz's granddaughter Isla, Lynn's and my friend Paul and our brother-in-law Marcel, Nancy's and John's friends Bev and Bruce. We remember Heather's mum, Elsie, in her recovery; and – in their struggles – Charles and Cheryl, Ed, Martina, Denny and Mair.

There are others whom we individually know and bring-to-mind.
<Pause> God, be their strength and help, providing for them from the core of their beings. Jesus, be our model and guide in caring for their needs. Holy Spirit, be the provoker of what needs doing, and the comforter when "what needs doing" are patience and acceptance.

All our prayers we make in Jesus' name. Amen.

Benediction

In the name of the Father I send you on your way: God who sends rain and sunshine to bless both the just and the unjust, and who knows our names and numbers the hair on our heads.

In the name of the Spirit I assure you of good company: that Spirit who inspired Jesus and the prophets; a presence in joy or pain, a counsellor in anxious times, a comforter in sorrow, and a discomforter whenever we become indifferent.

In the name of the Son I bless you: that Christ who loves us and gave himself for us, whose peace is our healing, whose rule is love, and whose grace will one day bring us eternally home with exceeding joy!.

Go out in faith, to love and serve the world. Amen.