

## June 19, 2011 - Trinity Sunday (A)

Readings for Trinity Sunday (Cycle A):

1. Exodus 34.4b-6, 8-9

In place of the psalm, Cantic from Daniel 3.52, 53, 54, 55. Response: "Glory and praise forever!"

2. 2 Corinthians 13.11-13

3. John 3.16-18

### Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading by Bill Hunt

It is hard for us who recite the Creed each Sunday to listen to today's gospel reading without hearing "God the Son" when John the Evangelist says "the Son" or "the Son of God." The two titles are not the same. Hopefully, by examining the differences between them we can enter more deeply into the mystery of the Trinity and ponder ways of expressing that mystery in language attuned to our own culture.

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What did John mean in today's gospel reading when he put the title "only [begotten] Son," "only [begotten] Son of God," or simply "the Son" on the lips of Jesus? For John and his community "son" was primarily a relational term. It was a powerful metaphor rather than an abstract philosophical concept. To say that Jesus was the Son of God was to say that Jesus stood in a relationship to God similar to that of a son to his father. This relationship would have been all the closer in the case of a man who had only one son.

For the original hearers of John's Gospel "son" had another extended meaning. In the Book of Proverbs, for example, the author frequently addresses the recipient of his advice as "my son." There "son" is not a biological relationship but the relationship of a male student to a revered teacher.

Furthermore, in the culture of Jesus' time society was made up of patrons, clients, and brokers. The only son of a powerful patron would be the natural broker of the patron's affairs. Thus, by referring to Jesus as God's Son and as the one sent by the father, John is saying that Jesus is the broker of God's favors, especially eternal life.

The notion of "son" is obviously closely related to the notion of "father." One of the relatively few things that we know with certainty about the historical Jesus is that he addressed God as "Father." "Father" was an unusual, although not absolutely unprecedented, way to address God.

At least sometimes Jesus used the Aramaic word "Abba " when addressing God. For many years scholars, following the great Joachim Jeremias, held that "Abba " was equivalent to "Daddy" and revealed Jesus' consciousness of an amazing intimacy with God, an intimacy similar to that of a young child with his or her loving father.

More recent critical scholars no longer hold that view. They contend that, although frequently used by children, "Abba" was an adult word that meant "the father," usually with the implication "my father," but not necessarily so. As James Barr puts it,

It is fair to say that 'abba in Jesus' time belonged to a familiar or colloquial register of language, as distinct from more formal and ceremonious usage . . . But in any case it was not a childish expression comparable with 'Daddy': it was more a solemn, responsible, adult address to a Father.  
(1988, 46)

"Father" could also be used for one's teacher or patron. It implied a combination of respect and affection. Perhaps Jesus used "Abba " in this way to refer to God as his Father/Patron.

Probably, the closest thing to the New Testament use of "Abba" in modern times is the Arabic word "Abu" which is used in honorific titles given to some Arab leaders. Thus, those close to Yasser Arafat, used to address him as "Mr. President" or "Mr. Arafat" in a formal setting. However, in an informal setting they would address him respectfully, yet affectionately, as "Abu Ammar." Similarly, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is also known as Abu Mazen.

For John the Evangelist, then, referring to Jesus as "the Son of God" indicated that the relationship of Jesus to God was like the relationship of an adult son to his powerful and generous father/patron. John was making a very straightforward statement about how Jesus acted, not a philosophical statement about who Jesus was or is. The important thing for John was loyalty to Jesus and to the Father. (See John 20.31 "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.") However, this description of the intimate relationship of Jesus to the Father did form the basis for later readers to ask the question: Who IS Jesus?

Fast forward three centuries to the Council of Nicea in the year 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Gospel of John is being read by people who hold philosophy, especially metaphysics, in the highest regard. They have a passionate interest in the ESSENCE of things, what they really ARE, not just how they function. They want to know what it means for Jesus to BE the Son of God.

Some had said that Jesus was the highest creature, "the firstborn of all creation," (Colossians 1.15) but not on a par with God, not of the same essence. Others, relying heavily on John's Gospel, (for example, John 10.30 "The Father and I are one.") held that Jesus was "one in being with the Father." How, then, was he distinct from the Father? They said as the Son of God he was "begotten not made." They also came up with a new term, "person," to express this reality. In Greek and Latin "person" was the mask used by an actor, which enabled one actor to play different roles. (The Latin *personare* means "to project sound through.")

The important thing to remember is that these fourth century Christian thinkers were grappling with the mystery of God in terms of their own culture and language. New circumstances and new questions forced them to return to the Gospels and the other scriptures to look for deeper meaning in the texts. They were convinced that Jesus, alive in the church through the Spirit, had a message and guidance for their own time – not just for the first century.

Fast forward again to 21st century USA. Today scientific knowledge is considered the highest form of knowledge. We distrust metaphysical speculation. The term "person" has taken on a psychological meaning. That is, psychology rather than drama forms the linguistic background for the term "person". Is it correct to say that God has three personalities? Probably not.

Where does that leave us? With many questions. Who is Jesus of Nazareth? How do we understand his resurrection? What was his consciousness of God? What happens to the Gospels when they are subjected to the methods of scientific history? In what sense is Jesus God? In what sense is God God? Is there a feminine side to God? Where does the Spirit fit in? What English word or phrase captures the respectful yet familiar relationship between a child and parent/patron?

Our situation has many similarities with that of our fourth century ancestors in the faith. We need to go back to the Gospels and reread them with these new questions in mind. We also have to remember that no human language can capture God. We seek the best concepts and metaphors for our time in continuity with the scriptural witness and Christian tradition, not eternal formulations for all ages. Like each generation before us, we must go back to the witness of the early Christians who "believed in the name of the only Son of God."

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In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works: Barr 1988 - James Barr, "'Abba Isn't 'Daddy,'" *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 39, Part 1 (April 1988), pp. 28-47.

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*the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 85-89.

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