
In Chanting the Trinity

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen!

This weekend we have another one of those convergences—two special days that each deserves their own separate observance: Trinity Sunday and Father’s Day. But of course it’s also possible to relate the two. I’ll come back to that in a moment. But first a comment about Father’s Day.

What’s on my mind is a television commercial that I’ve been seeing lately and maybe you’ve seen it too. It starts with a teenage young man getting a driving lesson from his father seated beside him in the car. They’re cruising down an avenue of trees in a pleasant residential neighborhood. Suddenly on the sidewalk they see walking past another teenager, an attractive young woman with her cellphone in hand. It happens for a split second that she looks up from her phone and briefly—too briefly locks eyes with the young man driving the car. Then she’s gone and the moment has passed. But the young man is so taken by the sight of her beauty that he turns his head trying to see more of her.

That’s exactly the moment, of course, that the viewer can see another vehicle crossing the road in front and the two cars about to impact. But there’s no problem! The teenager’s car stops all by its self because it’s high-tech. It anticipates crashing before the driver can. So instead of the two vehicles impacting each other, it’s you, me and other viewers who are impacted by the commercial; by the punch line as the voice-over says: “There are some things we no longer need our fathers for.”

So that’s it! We’re supposed to go out right away and buy one of those high-tech cars for the young person(s) in our life. Oh well! Another man and I were commenting on that commercial and he shared his observation that fathers are one of the last remaining groups that it’s still okay to belittle or make fun of; it’s not yet politically incorrect. However that may be let’s celebrate this weekend anyway and anyhow. We give our Father’s Day greetings to us dads, stepdads, granddads, and surrogate dads! Happy Father’s Day, people! Amen!

There is also an obvious connection, as I hinted earlier, between the Fatherhood of God and Trinity Sunday because on this day we celebrate the threefold being of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this celebration comes immediately after we observed the descent of the Holy Spirit last Sunday at Pentecost. So now we have all three Persons of the blessed Trinity in plain view, so to speak. But also notice this: if we begin with our long Genesis reading we also have the entire span of our Spirit-filled life in view by contemplating our lives through the matrix of the Trinity. By the way that word, “matrix,” is related to our word, ‘mother,’ as in the words, ‘matriarchy’ and ‘matriculate;’ and is my response to those who see only masculine imagery in the Trinity—in the image of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (also often as ‘He’). I’ll return to ‘mothering’ image of our theological ‘matrix’ below.

But for now recall that phrase, “In the beginning:” That’s how both Genesis and the Gospel of John begin. In the beginning of Genesis the Spirit is that “wind from God” sweeping across the cosmic waters. And in the beginning of John’s gospel Christ is that Word by which light and life and all the worlds are commanded into being. “Let there be light,” the Word of God speaks in command. But ‘let there be life overcoming death,’ we also hear in the rest of the gospel story: in the Cross and the resurrection to new life by which light and life and all the worlds are re-created.

One theological writer, our former Lenten speaker, James Alison, says it this way:

Jesus on the Cross gives up his Spirit to the Father. The Father at the resurrection gives back the Spirit to the Son,

and the two of them are then able to give this same Spirit . . . [to us] humans as induction into a new way of being human -- becoming children of God, quite outside the [crucifixions and] violence of the "world."

James Alison, The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes (NY: Crossroad, 1998), pp. 108. As quoted in Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary, Trinity A

But more precisely, how are we 'inducted into a new way of being human?' That was the question asked by another theological writer, the well-known C.S. Lewis. "How is it possible," Lewis wrote in an essay with the subtitle, "First Steps in the Doctrine of the Trinity,"

How is it possible [he asked] for us to be taken into the three-Personal life [of God]?

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, Book Four: "Beyond Personality: or First Steps in the Doctrine of the Trinity," "Good Infection"

Here I want to offer a mystical response, in addition to a theological response to Lewis's question. It's a simple four-line prayer; a mystical chant that was first introduced to me by a beloved priest here at the Cathedral, now deceased, the Revd. Bill Payton. (By the way, Fr. Payton attributed this chant to the Roman Catholic saint and Carmelite nun, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity; 1880-1906. But I've not been able to verify that source and would welcome anyone documenting it for me.) I'll share it by repeating it several times and you may find it resounding spontaneously in your mind as I repeat it; or you may find yourself, quite naturally, repeating its phrases after me. Go ahead, intone or 'in-chant' the Trinity with me. And I'll proceed to 'unpack it,' as they say, like a good college professor! But what I really want is for you to test it with me in your prayer life in the days and weeks ahead.

I want to test whether this chant makes it more likely, in Lewis's words, 'for us to be taken into the three-Personal life of God.' Something like that is what Roman Catholics attribute to praying the rosary, or our Eastern Orthodox Christians sometimes describe when they pray The Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." But I like to think that we Protestant Christians are every bit as capable of mystical contemplation as our other spiritual brothers and sisters. Let's see what you think!

Here's the chant [sung together if likely]:

God call us home.
Jesus make us one.
Holy Spirit come.
Love's will be done.

I'll chant [sing] it twice more:

God call us home.
Jesus make us one.
Holy Spirit come.
Love's will be done.

And one more:

God call us home.
Jesus make us one.
Holy Spirit come.
Love's will be done.

Now I hope you hear in that first line what I hear: not necessarily asking God to "call us home" to heaven. Perhaps you know that joke about everybody saying they want to go to heaven? That's half the joke already: 'Everybody says they want to go to heaven.' Then the punch-line: 'But nobody wants to go just now!' No, praying to God to "call us home" need not be about dying and going home in our afterlife. Rather it's also about being at home in God right now; being at home in God as our origin and our destiny—our 'alpha and omega.' For if God is the source of all creation, as in our Genesis story,

then as St. Paul declared to the Athenians in the Book of Acts we heard read a few Sundays ago, God is the One 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). God is our eternal home, now and forever.

So "God call us home." God call us home to you as the ground and source of all being. And now before we go the second line let's repeat the entire four lines again [sung together if likely]:

God call us home.
Jesus make us one.
Holy Spirit come.
Love's will be done.

So here's that second line: "Jesus make us one." Surely we have here an invocation of the entire life, mission and destiny of Jesus: first in the Incarnation, in becoming one of us as the Christ child, then in his three years of ministry among us, as he became identified with ordinary people including "the least of these," to quote his own phrase in Matthew's gospel (Mt. 25:40,45):

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

So Jesus makes us one through his radical identification with all people—with all 'sorts and conditions' of people, and without partiality; impelling us to do the same.

But preeminently Jesus 'makes us one' in his Cross. This is not only theology but also anthropology as we discover again and again. What we have discovered in the past 2000 years since the Crucifixion is the reality that Jesus' self-giving love on the Cross is reclaiming and reforming our human reality. Examples abound in world history of entire communities of people, Christian and non-Christian, insisting that the love of God made available to all people in the Cross requires us to stop persecuting, scapegoating, torturing and destroying one another. Thus in the Cross we believe that the 'sins of the whole world' are being absolved, and dissolved, and that the death of Jesus is atoning for us; that is, literally, making us 'at one' with God and each other. And so the Cross is our atonement matrix—there's that 'mothering' word again!—mothering us into reconciliation with God and each other in a world that would otherwise be given over to violence and destruction.

[Online Etymology Dictionary: atonement (n.) 1510s, "condition of being at one (with others)," from atone + -ment. Meaning "reconciliation" (especially of sinners with God) is from 1520s; that of "propitiation of an offended party" is from 1610s. atone (v.) 1550s, from adverbial phrase atonen (c.1300) "in accord," literally "at one," a contraction of at and one. It retains the older pronunciation of one. The phrase perhaps is modeled on Latin adunare "unite," from ad- "to, at" (see ad-) + unum "one." Related: Atoned; atoning.]

And now as we go the third and fourth lines I repeat the entire four lines again [sung together if likely]:

God call us home.
Jesus make us one.
Holy Spirit come.
Love's will be done.

The third line of our prayer invokes the Holy Spirit as the source of our empowerment to become one with God and each other. "Holy Spirit come," we pray. And we pray that prayer along with the very first disciples of Jesus as a Pentecost prayer; as the prayer they were praying that morning in the Upper Room as they awaited the gift of the Spirit that Jesus had promised them at his ascension. 'Come Holy Spirit,' was the content of their prayer; and it is the content of our prayers when we seek power, discernment, and inspiration from on high.

God call us home.
Jesus make us one.
Holy Spirit come
Love's will be done.

"Love's will be done." With this fourth and final line we are back to the Fatherhood of God where we began with this Father's Day observance, and the Fatherhood of God as invoked in the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:9, 10)

“Your will be done,” we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. And “love’s will be done,” we pray in our chant for today. And notice that in the Lord’s Prayer we also pray, “your kingdom come.” Nowadays many of us use that phrase “beloved community” to describe that ‘kingdom come’ in its earthly reality. Beloved community is where ‘love’s will’ is being done by us and to us and among us: among families and neighborhoods, organizations and institutions, and throughout our cities, nations and governments. In all these places we yearn and pray to be at home, at one, and through power of the Spirit to be in beloved community with one another.

Of course in all those places we still find ourselves asking the C.S. Lewis question: ‘How is it possible for us to be taken into the three-Personal life of God?’ But precisely in all those places our best answer is to pray—not only with words but also by actions and example—our chant; just as we chant it here one more time [sung together if likely]:

God call us home.
Jesus make us one.
Holy Spirit come.
Love’s will be done.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.