

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2006

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The Feast of the Holy Trinity is a late comer to the church calendar. The feast was proposed in the early 900's and spread slowly through the western church. St. Thomas a Becket's support contributed to its popularity in England.

Trinity fits into the logic of the calendar as the pinnacle of the revelation that began in Advent. We began the Christian revelation with the Old Testament teaching that there is only one God whom we call Father. In the feasts of Advent through Ascension, the Son of God is revealed. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is revealed. Trinity sums it all up. There is only one God who exists from eternity in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are united in one substance of being.

The lessons for Trinity Sunday predate the feast. They are the older lessons appointed for the octave day of Pentecost. The lessons are united by a common reference to the Holy Spirit.

In the gospel, Jesus told Nicodemus that unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Jesus further explained that this new birth is "of water and the Holy Spirit"—a reference to the baptismal gift of the Spirit. The essence of the Christian life is the gift of the Spirit. Apart from the gift of the Spirit we cannot see or enter the kingdom.

This point is illustrated in the lesson from Revelation. John saw a door opened in heaven and was invited to come up. The subsequent language is instructive. Revelation says, "Immediately, I was in the Spirit." It was only because John was "in the Spirit" that he was able to see the heavenly things that were revealed to him—unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.

The things John saw "in the Spirit" sound exotic and beyond comprehension. In fact, every aspect of John's vision was understood by his first century readers and can be understood by us if we know something about Old Testament temple worship and its connection to the liturgy—and if we have the gift of the Spirit that will enable us to see.

There are four things of note in the vision in today's lesson: one sitting upon the throne, twenty-four elders, seven Spirits of God and four living creatures.

The one sitting upon the throne is God. His appearance, like luminescent jewelry but without distinguishing features, reflects the Old Testament teaching that God's presence is glorious but God has no form. The vision is similar to the vision Moses and the 70 elders had in Exodus 24:10.

The twenty-four elders are a symbolic representation of the people of God who reign with Christ and offer prayer to him. As Revelation says, Jesus has "made us kings and priests" to God (1:7). The elders wear white because they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb" (Rev. 7:14, see also Rev. 19:8). The crowns they wear call to mind the "crown of

righteousness”, “the crown of glory” and “the crown of life” that we are promised in the epistles (2 Tim. 4:4, James, 1:12 and 1 Peter 5:4, resp.).

The seven Spirits of God are a reference to the Holy Spirit—seven being a symbolic number of perfection. There are seven because there were seven lamps on the menorah that burned in the Jewish temple. Every first century Jew would have recognized this.

The four living creatures are the cherubim. They are also described in Ezekiel 1. The wings of the cherubim overshadowed the Ark of the Covenant in the temple. The cherubim are present wherever God is present because God “dwelleth between the cherubim” (1 Sam. 4:4, 2 Sam 6:2. 2 Kings 19:15, Psalms 80:1, 99:1, Is. 37:16).

The vision of John continues past today’s lesson into the following chapter of Revelation. Revelation 5 gives us one more essential aspect of the vision. It says, “I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures and in the midst of the elders stood a Lamb as though it had been slain.” The Lamb, of course, is Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice has made him the centerpiece of worship for the people of God.

Thus, John’s vision is a vision of temple worship. Or, more particularly, it is a vision of the heavenly reality with which temple worship connected Israel. And it is a vision of the heavenly reality with which we are connected when we gather around the altar as the people of God to celebrate the Eucharist, which is the fulfillment of temple worship.

In the Spirit, we see all the things that John saw. We see the Lamb as though it had been slain—Jesus Christ who died and rose for us. We see the Holy Spirit in the lamps, or candles, that burn on the altar. We see the four living creatures, the cherubim, represented in our window above the altar. And here we are, the people of God, who worship before the throne. We lift up our hearts to join “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven,” in the eternal praise of God.

This is the end of our salvation. Jesus came down from heaven to save us. Then he ascended into heaven and sent us the gift of the Spirit to raise us up so that we might be with him. As St. Paul writes, God “has raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:3).