

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40
<i>Response</i>	Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 33:4-5, 6, 9, 18-19, 20, 22
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:14-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Glory to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; to God who is, who was, and who is to come.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 28:16-20

Today I would like to begin with a question. What is the central mystery of the Christian faith? I think if you asked most Catholics that question they would probably say, “well either it's the incarnation, so the mystery of God becoming man in Christ,” or they would say “it's the mystery of the Eucharist because it's the source and the summit of the Christian life,” and those are obviously extremely important, very central, very profound mysteries of the faith. What is fascinating though is that if you look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church it actually teaches that the central mystery of the Christian faith is the one we celebrate today, it's the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. So I would like to begin today just with a quote from the Catechism about this mystery before we look at the Scriptures that the church is going to use today to illuminate the mystery. This is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church 234 says about the mystery of the Trinity:

The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the “hierarchy of the truths of faith.” The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men...

So notice that it is a pretty staggering statement that the church is making there; that the mystery of the Trinity is the central mystery of the faith, it's the foundation

of all the other mysteries, ultimately because it's the mystery of who God is in himself. There are lots of other mysteries of our faith that tell us about what God does or what God has done, but this mystery is about who he is, One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So with that in mind let's look at the readings for today's lectionary and let us try to see why does the church choose the readings she does and what does it reveal to us not just about what God has done but who He is and what is this mystery that we call the Trinity. So we will begin by looking at the Gospel reading for today, which is from Matthew 28:16-20. Now you might be thinking at this point, "well wait, it's supposed to be Year B, it's supposed to be Mark." But, I think we've seen over the course of our Bible study that in Year B in particular the church will frequently take from other Gospels. In this case the reason she chooses this particular reading for this solemnity is that Matthew's Gospel — as well as the Gospel of John which is used for the other two years — is much more explicit about the mystery of the Trinity than Mark's gospel is. So Matthew gives us one of the classic expressions of the Trinitarian faith in the great commission. So that's the reading for today, let's look at it together. In Matthew 28:16-20 we read these words:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."¹

Now I think it should be pretty obvious here why the church has chosen this passage for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. It's obviously the reference to baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, but a few points about the passage as a whole before we look at that in detail. First, notice this is a resurrection appearance of Christ. This is taking place in Galilee after the resurrection. And you will recall from some of the Gospels that Jesus told

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the Apostles that if they go to Galilee he will appear to them there, and that appears to be what is being narrated here. Second, notice he's also appearing to them on a mountaintop. This is a classic example of what's called a theophany, an appearance of God. If you go back to the Old Testament, over and over again whenever God comes to his people, whenever God reveals himself to Israel, he will frequently do so on a mountaintop. So in this case — whereas in the Old Testament God reveals his divine power and identity to Israel on mountaintops — here Jesus is revealing himself to the Apostles on a mountaintop. So what this is is a revelation of the risen Christ's divinity. And we can see that because some of the responses of the Apostles is that they worship him, *proskyneō* is the Greek word, they fall on their faces before him and worship him — although it does say some doubted, which kind of makes me feel good that these apostles were in front of the risen Christ appearing to them in glory on a mountain and they still had trouble with it, they still struggle with that, they still had questions and some even still doubted. So maybe there is still hope for all of us who haven't seen him and who might struggle sometimes with our faith. Then finally, the third element here is the fact that Christ says to them “I am with you always, even to the end of time.” Again, this harkens back to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, the Emanuel prophecy, when the angel says to Mary that the child to be born will be called Emmanuel, which means God with us or God is with us. So Matthew's Gospel begins by revealing the Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and then it ends by Jesus speaking as Emmanuel by saying he will be with the apostles even to the end of the age, even to the end of time, precisely because he is God, because he is divine.

So I just want to highlight that because I want to show that Matthew's Gospel ends with a revelation of Jesus' divinity, and it is in that context that we also receive this revelation of the triune nature of God, when Jesus says to the apostles, now I want you to go out on mission to the ends of the earth, I want you to teach them everything I said to you, and I want you to baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Now up to this point in the Gospels Jesus never speaks this explicitly about the mystery of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So this is a momentous occasion, this great commission in Matthew 28. What's fascinating about this is that it really is a very helpful revelation of the mystery of the Trinity in so far as Jesus speaks of all three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but at the same time he also says that they are to be baptized in one name, right. So I never really thought about this until I noticed it in the Catechism of the

Catholic Church. In the catechism of the Catholic Church 233, which is right before paragraph 234 that I just read about the mystery of the Trinity — that seems a little obvious — but if you go back to it it says something that is very significant, it says:

Christians are baptized in the *name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: not in their *names* [plural]...

I will say that again. So Jesus commands us to be baptized in the name, singular, of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, not in the names, plural

for there is only one God, the almighty Father, his only Son, and the Holy Spirit: the Most Holy Trinity.

So what the Catechism is doing there is kind of pointing to the implicit revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is that while there is one God, there are three divine persons. So we have one divine nature, the what, his divinity, the divine nature that is sometimes called the Godhead; but we have three divine persons, three who's: one - Father, second - the Son, and the third - the Holy Spirit, all one God. So I just think this is a very fascinating insight into not just Matthew's Gospel, but the formula into which we are all baptized. So even the very language of being baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit reveals that mystery of one God, three persons very clearly there in Matthew 28. That's how the church interprets that text and that's how the church interprets our Trinitarian baptism. Okay, so that's the Gospel reading for today.

What about the Old Testament? Well before we look at anything it's important to make this caveat, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the tradition of the church have always made clear that although there are vestiges of the mystery of the Trinity, signs and shadows of the mystery of the Trinity in the Old Testament, the mystery as such has not been fully revealed until the New Testament. In other words, Jesus himself is the one that makes clear the mystery of one God with three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament we just get hints and signs and shadows. What the church does here in giving us readings of the Old Testament is that it selects certain passages which focus on the revelation of the one God, right, on the monotheism of the Old Testament, and also gives us oth-

er passages that give hints, signs and shadows of his triune character, that there is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — although not fully revealed yet.

So let's go back. So in this case the first reading for today really is focusing on just the revelation of monotheism, the revelation of the one God of Israel in the Old Testament. And this first reading is from Deuteronomy 4:32 and following. So if you look at Deuteronomy 4, Deuteronomy is presented as Moses' farewell speech to the Israelites. So the book is set on the plains of Moab before the Israelites enter into the promised land at the end of the 40 year period of the Exodus, the wandering in the wilderness. And in that context Moses is preaching to the second generation of Israelites about God and what he's done for them so that they can remember it after he's dead, after Moses is dead. In Deuteronomy 4:32 and following it says this:

"For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

Now it skips down to verse 39:

know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you this day, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the LORD your God gives you for ever."

So notice, the heart of this passage is the proclamation of the mystery of monotheism, that there is in fact only one God, the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He is the God who not only created the universe, he's also the God who saves the people of Israel through the signs and wonders of the Exodus from Egypt. So the

first reading for today is chosen to kind of reveal the fact that there is just one God, and we Catholics still believe that. We are not tritheists, we are monotheists. We believe in one God, the one Lord, the God of Israel, the maker of heaven and earth. So that's Deuteronomy 4. At the same time, the Old Testament gives us hints and shadows that there are more than one person in this one God. You already see this in the book of Genesis, for example, in chapter 1 whenever God says "let *us* make man in *our* image." Who is speaking here? *Us* implies more than one person. We call it the first person plural, so there's a plurality of persons. And yet at the same time it's just one God speaking, it is the one Lord who creates the world. The same thing even with the word *Elohim* itself, the word for God in the Old Testament is used as a singular, God, but the actual word *Elohim* is plural because the "im" at the end of the Hebrew word means more than one. So you can see little signs and shadows of the mystery of the plurality of persons in the Old Testament God.

The church today picks the Responsorial Psalm to kind of give us a hint of that. So today the Responsorial Psalm is Psalm 33, so let's turn there for just a second. On the surface of the Psalm it just looks like a kind of Psalm of blessing, of beatitude for those whom God has chosen, the people of Israel. I will just read the first six verses of the Psalm:

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright.
Praise the LORD with the lyre,
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!
Sing to him a new song,
play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
For the word of the LORD is upright;
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.
By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.

Okay, so pause there. Again, on the surface of this and from a monotheistic context, what the psalmist is simply doing is praising the Lord, whose name in Hebrew was YHWH. We don't know exactly how it was pronounced, it is usually pro-

nounced Yahweh, but he is saying the LORD, the creator of heaven and earth, let us give him praise and thanks for all that he has done and all that he has made. On the other hand, from the perspective of the New Testament, when we look back on this Psalm we see an interesting hint, an interesting shadow so to speak of the three persons of the Trinity. So first think here of God the Father, the one to whom we often appropriate the kind of primordial act of creation, the LORD, Yahweh, well there he is, YHWH, Yahweh, the inexpressible God, the one who made all things; but notice that the way the LORD makes the created world is through two agents so to speak. It mentions his word and his breath. So verse 6 in particular is powerful there: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made.” The Hebrew word for word is *dabar*, which can be translated into Greek as *logos*. So we'll see in the Gospel of John in the New Testament that he will say “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” and the Hebrew word behind *logos* there is *dabar*, you can translate *dabar* as *logos*. So we kind of see a hint of the second person of the Trinity, the word. But it's not just through his word the God creates, it is also through his breath, and as we've seen in previous videos, the Hebrew word for breath, *ruach*, is also the word for spirit. So in a kind of shadowy way here the church has selected a psalm which intriguingly mentions the Lord, the word and the breath; or the LORD, the word and the spirit, so little vestiges, little shadows of the revelation to come of this triune God: Father, Son and Spirit; or Father, word and breath.

So these are beautifully selected readings for this Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, and just as a side note, I would encourage everyone out there, whenever you're catechizing on the mystery of the Holy Trinity, one of things sometimes catechists get anxious about is “well what analogy should I use to best express the mystery of the Trinity? Should it be the three leaf clover or maybe like the different states of water: ice (frozen water), water as a gas, or water as a liquid?” There is some value to those kind of natural analogies — although they all have their problems too if you start to press them too far. I always try to encourage people, if you're teaching about the Trinity, one great way to teach about the Trinity is to use the words that God uses to reveal the Trinity. In other words, try to teach about the Trinity through the words of Sacred Scripture itself. So point to things like Psalm 33, which express that God uses his word and his breath to make the world and that this reveals to us certain aspects or characteristics of the Son and the Spirit as the word and the breath of God, those kind of things. Point to the the great commission, Matthew 28, the words of baptism, that we are baptized into three persons but only one name, because it's one God. So in other words use Scripture to help illuminate this greatest of all mysteries, the mystery of God in himself.

Finally, last but not least, I would like to close here with an insight from the living tradition. It is very fascinating that from its earliest days Christianity was not just monotheistic but Trinitarian. In other words, the Trinity, the central mystery of the faith, was central in the early church's life and worship. You see this especially in a book called the *Didache*. The *Didache* is an anonymous Christian writing, it is usually dated to the first century, although some scholars think it's from the second century A.D., and what it gives us is a kind of summary of apostolic teaching and practice. I want to give you its description of ancient Christian baptism, which was always Trinitarian. Just listen to these words. Imagine an ancient Christian writing coming from the first century A.D., around the time of the New Testament, this is what it says about baptism:

Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows... *baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water*. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.²

So I just want you to notice there on the one hand the forms of baptism with regard to the water was something not essential. So you could have a full immersion in what it calls running water — it means moving water like in a stream. That would be the ideal situation. But if you don't have access to a stream you can use some other kind of water, whether cold or warm, even the temperature isn't essential, and if you don't have running water then you could just pour water on the head, but notice that you want to do it three times to signify that Trinitarian character of baptism. So I bring that up just to kind of show you first of all that baptism by pouring or sprinkling is not a modern Catholic invention, it's something that goes all the way back arguably to the first century A.D. But even more importantly, that the church itself shows us that the Trinity is the central mystery of faith by the very act of baptizing us into the Trinity, because that's how we become Christians, is to be baptized into this mystery, the mystery of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that's the mystery that we are celebrating on this solemnity, the mystery into which we were all baptized the day we received the grace and the indwelling life of the Trinity into our souls.

² *Didache* 7:1-3; trans. M. Holmes, p. 355