

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40
<i>Response</i>	Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 33:4-5, 6, 9, 18-19, 20, 22
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:14-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mt 28:16-20

The second reading for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity in year B is from Paul’s exquisite letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 14-17. And this verse is about the mystery of Christian prayer, and you’ll see very clearly, very quickly, why it was chosen for the feast of the Trinity when we read these words. Paul says:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.¹

First point I would make about this passage — it’s short, but it’s important — is the Trinitarian framework of Paul’s thought. The word “Trinity” is not going to be coined until the time of Tertullian, writing in the late 2nd century AD in North Africa — famous Latin Christian writer.

But the reality of the Trinity is something that runs like a golden thread, a Triune thread, throughout Paul’s letters. And you’ll see it, just for example, in this small

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.

passage here. Paul refers to the Holy Spirit when he speaks about the Spirit of God. He refers to the Father when he says:

When we cry, “Abba! Father!”

And of course he refers to the Son when he speaks about us being fellow heirs with Christ. This is going to be how Paul speaks throughout his letters, this Trinitarian personage. Each of these persons — Father, the Son, and the Spirit — he will speak of in the very same way that Jews speak of the Lord, speak of the one God of Israel. And so the first reason this passage is chosen for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity is because it’s one of the passages in Paul where he clearly refers to all three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The second reason it’s chosen is because Paul gives us here a kind of developed articulation of who this Spirit is. He says that:

...all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

And he goes on to clarify:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship.

Notice the relationship between the Spirit and the Father and the Son. The Spirit is of God the Father, but He’s also the Spirit of the Son who dwells in us and through whom we received the Spirit of sonship that enables us to cry out to God in prayer, “Abba, Father!”

Alright, now pause here. Paul, recall, is writing his letters in Greek. He’s a Greek speaking Jewish Christian. He’s writing to Greek speaking Christians of probably both Jews and Gentiles, especially in Rome, because the congregation seems to have been a mixed congregation — both Jews and Gentiles. But here he uses an Aramaic word to refer to God, *abba*. Now that word occurs here, and it occurs one other time in the New Testament that’s very significant. If you have your Bible, you can turn to Mark chapter 14, verse 36. This is the famous account of Jesus in

the garden of Gethsemane. And you might recall that if you go back to the Gospel of Mark in chapter 14, verse 32 and following, it describes Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane. And His prayer, listen to how Mark describes it. It says:

And they went to a place which was called Gethsem'ane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I pray." And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch."

In other words, keep vigil with me. The night of Passover in Judaism was a vigil. It was a time to stay up at night in prayer for hours, if not all night. And then it says:

And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." (Mark 14:32-36)

In other words, Jesus, in prayer to the Father, addressed Him with the Aramaic word for father, which is "abba." Now, in both Paul and in the Gospel of Mark there, Jesus says "Abba, Father", so literally in Greek it would be abba, *patér*. So *patér* is the Greek word for father, and Abba is the Aramaic word for father. But what Mark appears to be giving us here is a window into the language of Jesus' own prayer life — that when He cried out to God in the anguish of Gethsemane, He actually reverted to the Aramaic. He used the Aramaic word for father.

And as a side note, you'll hear it commonly preached that the word *abba* — the best English translation of the word *abba* — is "daddy" as a way of kind of revealing the intimacy of a child. One of my teachers, however — James Barr, who's very famous, Hebrew philologist — once wrote a famous article called "Abba doesn't mean daddy." And he kind of criticized that tendency to make the Aramaic word into simply a word that children used for their fathers.

But it does have a certain intimacy to it, but it's just the Aramaic word for father. And we'll see Jesus, actually — when He instructs His disciples to pray, He tells them to say "Our Father (*patér hémón* in Greek) who art in Heaven" or *pater*

noster in Latin. He didn't speak Latin. Well, he might have said Latin. Anyway, I don't want to go into all that right now. Latin would not have been the primary language of Jesus and the disciples, for sure. Greek and Aramaic are the two main candidates, and many scholars think they were bilingual. So, apart from that, the point is, calling God Father alone is an act of intimacy.

If you go back to the Old Testament, God is described as Father on a number of occasions, a handful of occasions. And he's even addressed as Father by the prophet Isaiah and also the book of Sirach. So there are a couple of occasions where God is addressed as Father in prayer. But, it's not common at all. The primary mode of addressing God in prayer is as Lord and God — Lord being the translation of the Hebrew tetragrammaton, the four sacred letters, YHWH. So in the Old Testament, thousands of times in the Psalter, God is addressed as Lord. But when Jesus comes on the scene, He teaches His disciples to address God as *patér*, as Father. And He Himself addresses God as Abba.

Why? Because the prayer of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus is an introduction — an induction — into the mystery of the Trinity. Jesus calls God Father more times in the Sermon on the Mount alone than God is called Father in the Old Testament. Why? Because He's revealing the mystery of God's fatherhood as one of the principal teachings He's given to the disciples. So when they say, "Teach us how to pray," He says, "Pray like this: *patér hémón*" — Our Father, who art in Heaven.

Okay, so Paul's piggy-backing on this, and what's fascinating is, the only two times Abba occurs in the New Testament is in Mark 14 and Romans 8 — if my memory serves, I think that's right — which shows that He can assume the Greek-speaking Christians in the Church in Rome are using the Aramaic language of Jesus in their prayer. In other words, Christian prayer — this is important — is an *imitatio Christi*, an imitation of Christ. We're going to pray to the Father in the Spirit, even using the very words that Jesus Himself prayed while He was on Earth, above all in His agony in Gethsemane. And Paul says this all makes sense because:

...it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ... (Romans 8:16-17a)

I'll pause there. What does that mean? Here Paul's using kind of standard Jewish imagery of the idea of the firstborn son getting a double portion of the inheritance. So if you remember in the Old Testament, you have lots of conflict between sons like Jacob and Esau over who gets the blessing, who gets the birthright... you know, conflict between the sons of Jacob (the twelve sons of Jacob) over inheritance and gifts from the father.

So what Paul is doing is he's depicting Christ as the firstborn son but then all those who are baptized into Christ are not just believers. They are children of God who have been made children through the gift of the Spirit of the Son, and who, because they are children, are now fellow heirs with Christ. In other words, we have an inheritance.

Now, if you've ever gone through the process of dividing up the inheritance between your brothers and sisters — maybe if your parents pass away — or you've watched relatives divide up the inheritance after parents have passed away, it's a delightful and wonderful experience, right? No, there can be a ton of conflicts. Families can be divided over who gets what portion of the inheritance. And what Paul is saying is that because we're Christ's younger brothers and sisters, then we're not just children of God; we're heirs. And what are we heirs to? The kingdom of Heaven. We're heirs to the glory of Christ with one provision: provided that we suffer with Him. Ouch.

I wanted to be an heir without any suffering, Paul. What are you talking about? Well, because in order to inherit that which is ordained for us, which is the life of the kingdom, the life of the Trinity, we have to be conformed to the image of the Son as Paul will say later in Romans 8 — which means conformed to His cross *and* glory. So in order to receive the glory, we have to suffer with Him on the cross, because that's what sonship looks like. That's what the mystery of the Trinity looks like. If we want to enter into the mystery of the Trinity, we have to conform ourselves to the love of the Trinity. And the love of the Trinity was expressed in the love of the Son, who cried out in agony in Gethsemane:

“Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.” (Mark 14:36)

So I can't help but wonder here too that if Paul, when he says:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear... (Romans 8:15a)

...that if he's speaking there of a spirit of fear of suffering. And so that when he says when we cry Abba Father, he's not just saying, “Hey, in a general way, when we pray, we pray to God as Father.” I think in a specific way, he might be alluding — I'm just speculating here, but it's just interesting to think about — to the one time we know Jesus prayed “Abba, Father” is when He's praying in Gethsemane. It's through the suffering of Christ that He enters into the glory of sonship, and the same thing is true for us as well.

So, in closing, what does all this have to do with the Trinity? What does it mean for us? I guess, for me, this passage from Paul really made me reflect on the mystery of our prayer life. Notice what Paul is saying here is, because we have the Spirit of the Son, we can pray to God as Father. We can imitate Jesus in His prayer. And even further, we can actually participate, in a sense, in the prayer of Jesus. When Jesus teaches us to pray the Our Father and to pray to God *as* Father, He's teaching us to pray like He prayed.

I've never found anyone state this more clearly than St. Cyprian of Carthage. This is a great little book called *On the Lord's Prayer*. It's three patristic commentaries on the Lord's Prayer by Tertullian, by St. Cyprian of Carthage (who was the third century bishop of Carthage in North Africa), and then of course, famous Origen of Alexandria. Each one of them wrote commentaries on the Our Father, on the Lord's Prayer.

This is actually pretty standard in the patristic tradition. People wanted to know, what do the words of the Lord's prayer mean? What am I saying when I pray these words? Especially catechumens, who would not be given the words of the Creed or the Lord's Prayer. They were treated as sacred and secret. So when they were given

to them, they would often exposit those words, explain them to people who were becoming Catholics, who were becoming Christians, who were being baptized — coming from paganism over into Christianity. And so in his discussion of the Lord’s Prayer, St. Cyprian says this. Listen to this:

Let us pray, dearest brothers, just as God the master has taught us.

In other words, the words that Jesus gave us.

Imploring God in his own words, sending up to his ears the prayer of Christ, is a friendly and familiar manner of praying. When we make our prayer let the Father recognize the words of his own Son. May he who lives inside our heart be also in our voice...”²

Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lord’s Prayer*, paragraph 3. Wow. I hope you heard what he just said. When we pray the Lord’s prayer, according to Cyprian, because the Our Father is the words of Jesus Himself, and because we, as baptized Christians, have received the Spirit of God and are members of the Body of Christ... when we pray the Our Father, we’re not just saying the words Jesus taught us to say. We’re actually praying to the Father with the very words of His Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. So that when our words of the Our Father ascend to God the Father in Heaven, He hears the words of His Son — which remember, because they’re part of Sacred Scripture, are inspired by the Holy Spirit. So we’re praying with the humanity of Jesus, with the human words He gave us, that were inspired by the Spirit to the Father in Heaven.

In other words, the praying of the Our Father — which again, in the early Church, was one of the basic staples of Christian life. If you’re a Christian, you say the Our Father three times a day — every morning, every midday, every evening. That was just a basic rhythm of the Christian life. Just like the Jews that pray the Shamah in the morning and midday and evening, or at least twice a day (morning and evening), Christians took that and they ran with that with the Our Father.

² Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lord’s Prayer* 3 (trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes)

But when we pray the Our Father, it isn't just a recitation of a vocal prayer. It's an entry into the mystery of the Trinity. For a Christian, a baptized Christian, prayer itself — especially the praying of the Lord's Prayer — is a Trinitarian mystery, because we are praying to Abba Father in the words of the Son through the power of the indwelling Spirit of God.

And that's why we can be confident that those prayers when spoken — not just with the mouth but from the heart — are heard by the Father. As St. Cyprian says, when we pray the Our Father:

May he who lives inside our heart be also in our voice...

So that when we pray that prayer, we (in a sense) experience a little foretaste of Heaven itself, which is nothing less than us spending eternity as members of the Son, glorifying the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.