Sermon for Trinity Sunday Year C

Readings: Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

i

In Proverbs 8 we are introduced to the lovely Lady Wisdom and soon we read about her being appointed from eternity, before the world began, when God set the heavens in place, gave the sea its boundary and marked out the foundations of the earth, and I, says Lady Wisdom, was the craftsman at his side (NIV). It is hard to avoid the immediate comparison with what John says about the Word, who was in the beginning with God, and the Word was God, and through him all things were made (John 1:1-3).

We rather like Lady Wisdom today for it satisfies our desire for a feminine image of God. But that’s what it is – an image, a metaphor. Male imagery too is metaphor.

All our language about God is image and metaphor, how could it be anything else? We only have our human languages and concepts which we stretch beyond their normal meaning to point towards a greater, unfathomable reality.

So Lady Wisdom is just one metaphor among many – which include Word, Spirit, cloud, glory, face of God, fire, architect, judge, shepherd, king, Father and so on. The Gospels also supply us with a rich panoply of images – including lamb, bread, water, stream, light, gate, vine and so forth.

Yet if all our language of God is inevitably metaphorical, why is it that we have become “stuck” with three images above all others, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Why do they take precedence above all others?

Well, I believe it is because although all the other metaphors for God which we find in the Bible convey illuminating truths about God’s being, purpose and works, the metaphors Father, Son and Holy Spirit became fixed through historic revelations of God’s nature at the Incarnation and at Pentecost.

We have settled on calling God Father because that it how Jesus spoke of God. We have settled on calling Jesus the Son because he was historically male and also spoke of himself in such terms (at his trial according to Mark 14:62), or was spoken of in those terms by others (such as Nathanael in John 1:49), by a voice from heaven (as at his baptism in Mark 1:11), by demons during exorcisms (as Mark 3:11) and by his disciples on various occasions.

It is not a metaphor alone that Jesus died on the cross, rose again and ascended to God’s right hand. It is not a metaphor alone, but historical reality that Jesus’ followers believe they experience the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit that first came down upon the apostles at Pentecost.

It is because Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection and Pentecost are historical events which disclose the very being, purpose and works of God that these metaphors have become fixed points of reference. Since these events we cannot speak of God without speaking of God as revealed to us in these historical disclosures – hence Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

ii

Jesus is the reason we Christians have stopped talking of God in the same way as the Jewish faith speaks of God and developed that foundation into what we now call the Trinity. Let us look briefly at why Jesus has had that effect.

In today’s Gospel reading from John 16:12-15 we read about the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Jesus and God the Father.

It might be better to look elsewhere to first build a picture of what Jesus says about his relationship to God who he calls Father, or even Abba, “dad”.

Many of the OT prophecies which were later taken as references to a coming Messiah actually speak as if God himself was coming: “Surely this is our God, we trusted in him and he saved us” (Isaiah 25:9), or “They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God” (Isaiah 35:3) and again, “Here is your God. See the Sovereign Lord comes with power” (Isaiah 40:9-10).

According to John’s Gospel, Jesus said two apparently contradictory things about his relationship with God the Father. He spoke of his oneness with God the Father as well as the Father being greater than he.

The Father being greater than he (John 14:28) is interpreted by many, including Wesley, as meaning Jesus in his human nature is subordinate to God, but Jesus in his divinity is equal with God the Father.

In John 5:19 Jesus says he can do nothing without the Father – this is the obverse of saying “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” So to see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9); to receive the Son is to receive the Father also (John 14:23), to obey Christ is to obey the Father (John 5:23).

Paul sums up Jesus’ relationship with the Father in the following words: “God was in Christ reconciling himself to the world” (2 Cor 5:19) and “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created…for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Col 1:15-19).

Jesus does not offer the world a partial glimpse of God from a particular perspective, from a passing historical and cultural point of view – as all the rest of us can only offer – but Jesus reveals the being, purpose and works of God that transcends time and place because Christ has always been with God and has always been God.

The metaphor for that relationship within the Jewish culture is that of Father and Son. Later, in a Greek culture the Creeds spoke of Christ as “God’s only Son” (Apostles Creed) and in the Nicene Creed Christ as “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father.”

Since Jesus established and expanded forever our understanding of God, the language Jesus used and that of his first disciples is embedded in our Tradition: Jesus is the Son of God the Father.

iii

In today’s Gospel passage from John 16:12-15, we see how this embryonic form of the Trinitarian formula is brought together. Paul also gives us a foretaste in Romans 5:1-5.

Paul says we are justified by faith in Christ; in Christ we find our peace with God and God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

John ‘s account tells us that the Holy Spirit is not some new and separate manifestation of the divine will, as if Christ is now history and no longer relevant:

*He will not speak on his own; he will only speak what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come* (John 16:13).

And again we have an example of an embryonic Trinitarian formula in verse15:

*All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said that the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you” (NIV).*

In other words, as Jesus is 100% reliable in conveying the being, purpose and works of God to the world, so too the Holy Spirit is 100% reliable as witness of God the Father and God the Son. God is known fully and in his eternal truth in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is important to us because it reassures us that our inner experience of what we call the Holy Spirit is not a creation of the mind, a mental projection of the ideal of our own devising. Through our sin and human ignorance, our understanding of what the Spirit wishes to teach us is partial, disfigured and moulded by our earthly experiences and cultural assumptions, but after all that, it is truly God who comes to us and so we are bold to say, we “know Jesus.”

For the Christian, therefore, Jesus cannot be just another prophet and spiritual guide alongside many other notable and holy men and women. Jesus is irreplaceable to Christians for any thought about God. The Holy Spirit is our awareness of God who must also bear witness to Jesus the Son. This is the irreplaceable, irreducible God whom we have known: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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