

God the Most Holy Trinity – three persons yet one God

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Trinity Sunday 30-5-2021 Isa 6¹⁻⁸ Ps 29 Rom 8¹²⁻¹⁷ Jn 3¹⁻¹⁷

Sisters and brothers...you didn't receive a spirit of slavery...you've received a spirit of adoption.¹⁶... that very Spirit [bears] witness with our spirit that we are children of God...joint heirs with Christ.

Paul packs a lot into a tight space, doesn't he! Let's unpack it slowly, and see what Paul might want to tell us on this Trinity Sunday.

There seem to me to be two layers of meaning. Firstly, there's us on the receiving end of God's kindness, and the implications that has for our human relationships. Then there's God's outreach to us which we experience as three co-operating forces acting in perfect harmony: encouragement, adoption, and incorporation into the family of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So to the first layer of meaning: the human level. Paul calls the people he's writing to sisters and brothers. (We can safely assume he means us too.) He says their and our status in the household of faith is not that of slaves but, *as the Spirit bears witness to our spirits, we are God's children.*

Just as he experiences his membership of the body of Christ, Paul is saying that the Roman Christians (and we) are free, full members of God's household; children – siblings – in our own home. So he says we have the astonishing privilege of being joint heirs with Christ. This is about close relationship; not insiders and outsiders – no lower or upper

caste; no hierarchy, but shared, intimate, equal family life.

From his own personal experience as a former persecutor of Christians, Paul knows just how astounding it is that we Christians may be described this way: as siblings, as God's children, and as joint heirs with Christ – no matter what our background. And that adds to the wonder of what he's saying because the Roman church was profoundly split along ethnic and social lines.

The other layer of meaning in this passage is found in the three ways God offers us this privilege of belonging in the family.

Firstly, the words '*we are children of God*' mean God has chosen to relate to us as our parent. Our tradition has responded; we call God our Father – or our Parent – Source of our Being. Before, we related to God more as our maker and our judge. But being invited to call him Father says this Maker is more than an artisan at work; and this judge is on our side. All this transforms our relationship, both with God and with each other, to family. This is the will of the Source of our Being.

Secondly, we are named as *joint heirs with Christ*. Jesus is the true heir of the Father! This teaching acknowledges Christ as equal with the Father. Just as any human child shares the human nature of their parents, Christ shares fully the divine nature of the Father. And he has taught us to pray and call God *our* Father too. How astonishing is this privilege for us?! And there's that family connection again – with God and with each other – through Christ. He called us by his life and ministry, his death and resurrection and ascension into this relationship.

And thirdly, *the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God ... joint heirs with Christ*. Again, I have to say this is an astounding honour. And there it is again too

– the connection is a family relationship – which Paul affirms by calling us siblings, both to himself and to each other. It's a family relationship which he has now told us has the threefold stamp of encouragement adoption and incorporation into the family of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This has a special poignancy when we remember that Paul was writing to a divided church in Rome. As I've said, the Christians there were divided along ethnic and social lines, like many modern churches are. But he called them all siblings – siblings to him, to Christ, and by logical extension, siblings to each other. And he did so by asserting that this relationship was one deliberately established by God the Holy Trinity, as we've just seen.

Who would have imagined that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity had anything in it about breaking down ethnic and social barriers? Who would have thought that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity meant anything about *our* identity – about *our* relationships with *each other* – about us? But it does. Whatever our race or social standing, we're siblings. Paul most famously spelt this out in his letter to the Galatian church ^{3.28} ²⁸*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

That rather knocks the stuffing out of racial and social prejudices, doesn't it. Racists and snobs and misogynists are right out of touch with this ultimate reality about the way God sees us all. And it goes right back. In Genesis 1.26, we read: ^{26a}*God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.*

Today, with our focus on God the Most Holy Trinity – three persons, yet one God – *God in community*, Paul teaches us that being in God's image, after God's likeness means being community, and so rejects forces of disunity. And it doesn't

mean a choice for slavish uniformity; it means seeking harmony in diversity.

Perhaps our musicians can demonstrate that with the notes E,G and C. Until we hear the three notes together, we don't know what key signature we're dealing with. Without knowing God as Trinity, we're missing out on who God is, and who we are called to be.

Paul has just given us a lesson about *God in community* calling diversity into harmony. *God* whom we worship, *God* in whose image and likeness we are made – *God is a community*. And we discover our true selves as the image and likeness of *God* – in our family connection with *God* and with each other – in a choice to be community; family to each other.

And here we are; a community of people who are mostly not related to each other, and who probably wouldn't know each other if it weren't that *God* has adopted us all into this family. And somehow, together, we are the image and likeness of *God*. Our pilgrimage – our journey of faith – is to discover that, and to live it – discover who we are, why we've been called, and importantly, to ask *What now?*

Paul gives us a picture of the community of love that is *God* at work. We see it most clearly as an example to us in the ministry of *Jesus* – who is himself *God*. Reaching out to ex-communicated people, *Jesus* gathers these to himself. He incorporates them into a new family, if necessary, staring down ex-communication himself from a society which sets itself apart and keeps all the belonging to itself.

The community of love that *Jesus* models – and that is our calling too – is outgoing – active – notices these ex-communicated ones and includes them.

Such is our lesson this Trinity Sunday. Amen