

Anyone under the illusion that Trinity Sunday is about an other-worldly doctrine needs only to consider the earth-shattering experience of Paul the apostle. More than once in his letters he boasts of his Jewish heritage. "I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin," he wrote in his letter to the Romans (11:1 NRSV). As such he would have prayed the Shema daily with deep devotion: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Dt 6:4 NRSV). We can hardly imagine how seismic was his discovery that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, in whom "the One God has acted climactically and decisively . . . even as Israel's Messiah. A shocking blinding reality. The reality that would change the world" (N.T. Wright. *Paul, A Biography*, NY: HarperCollins, 2020, 54). Famously Paul went on to write of "the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything . . ." (Phil 3:8). In time Paul understood more and more deeply how faith in Christ gave birth to life in the Spirit. His letters are a treasure trove of teaching about the work of the Spirit in individuals and communities alike. We cannot reclaim Paul's original experience for ourselves, but whenever we are greeted with "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit," we can feel solidarity with him.

## A reading from the book of Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9

With the two tablets of stone in his hands, Moses went up the mountain of Sinai in the early morning as the Lord had commanded him. And the Lord descended in the form of a cloud, and Moses stood with him there.

He called on the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'Lord, Lord, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness.' And Moses bowed down to the ground at once and worshipped. 'If I have indeed won your favour, Lord,' he said 'let my Lord come with us, I beg. True, they are a headstrong people, but forgive us our faults and our sins, and adopt us as your heritage.'

## Responsorial Psalm Daniel 3:52-56

You are blest, Lord God of our fathers.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

Blest your glorious holy name.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

You are blest in the temple of your glory.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

You are blest on the throne of your kingdom.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

You are blest who gaze into the depths.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

You are blest in the firmament of the heaven.

R. Glory and praise for ever!

## First Reading

Today's reading from Exodus is illuminated by two prior episodes in the book. The first occurred before the exodus event. Moses had fled Egypt after being seen to murder an Egyptian. It was while he was minding his father-in-law's sheep at Mt Horeb that he saw the burning bush and encountered God. God was revealed to him as "I am who I am" (3:14) and as the "God of your fathers" (3:15-16). These names for God are now expanded on. Israel's God is "a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness". This divine self-description became an article of faith for Israel, repeated elsewhere in the Pentateuch and in the psalms and prophets. The verse that follows, pledging punishment for transgressions, has been omitted from the lectionary text. The omission has a certain logic to it because what preceded Moses' ascent of Mt Sinai was Israel's lapse into idolatry with the golden calf. In response Moses had destroyed the original two tablets of the Law. He now takes two new ones with him up the mountain. There God reveals more of the divine name, hears Moses' plea for forgiveness and, in the passage that follows today's, establishes a new covenant with the Israelites instead of punishing them for their apostasy. This is a text of high importance. It deserves to be proclaimed with a degree of solemnity. It builds towards the central revelation of God's name and Moses' response. The ensuing plea for forgiveness, while significant, is of lower intensity.

## Responsorial Psalm

Today is the only occasion in the three-year cycle of Sundays and feast days that the responsorial psalm comes from the book of the prophet Daniel. There's good reason for its use today. The first reading finished with Moses begging God to forgive the people for their worship of the golden calf. In sharp contrast, it's the refusal of three young Israelites to adore a golden statue that has given rise to this canticle. Their defiance so infuriated King Nebuchadnezzar that he had them thrown into a fiery furnace, but this only inspired them to sing God's praises. The canticle is believed to be a later addition to the book of Daniel, so in some bibles (such as the NRSV) it is found in a separate place. It is a lengthy chant of praise for the Creator. After the introductory verses, different facets of creation are named one after another and exhorted to praise God. Only these first verses serve as the responsorial psalm. There are two unusual features in the layout of the canticle in the standard lectionary (but not the NRSV lectionary) that readers need to take into account. The first is that the response is not given for readers to announce first. It only appears after the canticle has begun, with no forewarning for the assembly. The common-sense remedy would be for readers to announce the response – "Glory and praise for ever!" – beforehand in the usual way before launching into the verses. The second is that the response is prayed after every single line, not at the end of a stanza. Rather than give intrusive instructions about this, readers should give vocal and visual cues to prompt the assembly's response.

## A reading from the second letter of St Paul to the Corinthians 13:11-13

Brothers, we wish you happiness; try to grow perfect; help one another. Be united; live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with the holy kiss. All the saints send you greetings.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with you all.

## Second Reading

Paul's second letter to the Christian community in Corinth has so many disconcerting changes of mood that a number of scholars think it was compiled from a number of different letters. Whatever the case, there's no trace of the strong emotions expressed earlier in the letter to be found in the conclusion that we read today.

These final three verses are calm, plainly expressed and affectionate. There is none of Paul's characteristic rhetoric or complex theological argumentation, only sound advice. He offers them a simple set of encouraging directives for living the Christian way. It's the greeting with which he signs off that is most pertinent today. It should sound familiar because it's one of the regular greetings which the presider may offer the assembly at the beginning of the eucharistic celebration.

The trinitarian formula Paul employs is not the product of abstract theological speculation. It long predates the subtle and complex arguments about the Trinity that followed in later centuries. Paul's greeting is firmly grounded in his religious experience. His Jewish heritage – profound faith in the one true God – has been enriched by his life-changing discovery of Christ and the power of the Spirit. With this greeting Paul is inviting the Corinthians, and succeeding generations, to make his personal experience their own.

This is a lovely text for readers to proclaim. Each of Paul's warm admonitions should be given their due emphasis so that the assembly can savour them. Readers are advised to practise how to deliver the concluding greeting without prompting the assembly to respond with "And with your spirit".

## A reading from the holy Gospel according to John 3:16-18

Jesus said to Nicodemus,

'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. No one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he has refused to believe in the name of God's only Son.'

## Gospel

The Holy Spirit has often been called the forgotten person of the Holy Trinity. Ironically, today's set of readings seems to reinforce this perception. The first reading reveals the name of the one God. The gospel's primary focus is on God's Son. This means that the only reference to the Holy Spirit today is in the last breath of the second reading. Earlier verses from chapter three of John's gospel that refer to being born of the Spirit are not heard.

Recent Johannine scholarship, however, has discerned the presence of a wisdom or "Sophia" tradition throughout the gospel. Time and again, Jesus can be seen as the embodiment of the wisdom that features prominently in several books of the Old Testament. There, wisdom is generally a feminine figure who makes God's creating, redeeming and judging work present in the world. This is what today's gospel attributes explicitly to God's Son, and perhaps implicitly to Sophia.

Of the gospel's three sentences, the first two make strong positive assertions about God's purpose in sending his Son, namely to have eternal life and to be saved. After these encouraging declarations, the third sentence is quite downbeat. Those who refuse to believe, it says, condemn themselves. Ministers of the word would be right to give primary emphasis to the two affirmations and only secondary attention to the final words of warning.