

### God the Father – also, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Today is Trinity Sunday, when Episcopalians celebrate the holy mystery of our one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I say “mystery” because, while God’s divinity is relatively easy to grasp, God’s triune nature is not. The term “Trinity,” from the Latin *ter* for “three” and *unitas* for “unity,” was devised by the early Christian writer Tertullian to express what *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* calls “the mystery of the ‘unity-in-diversity’ of God.” If that strikes you as a bit opaque, try this affirmation from *The Articles of Religion*, established by the Episcopal Church in 1801 and subsequently relegated to the “Historical Documents of the Church” section of *The Book of Common Prayer*: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” Or, as explained in “The Creed of Saint Athanasias,” another historical document in the *BCP*, “we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance ... And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other; none is greater, or less than another; But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped. [A Christian] therefore that will be saved must think thus of the Trinity.” Aren’t you glad we got that all cleared up?

We know God is three Persons because Scripture names them for us. The Father, first Person of the Trinity, is the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus, the Father’s Word, Son and second Person of the Trinity, was begotten by the Father, though John’s Gospel tells us that he was with the Father from the beginning, which makes his begetting something of a mystery, too. The Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, “proceeds” from the Father and the Son, though

Bible scholars don't agree about what that means. Some see the Spirit's procession as akin to light radiating from the sun; others think it might mean the Father and Jesus sending the Spirit into the world with instructions to guide humankind and bring the kingdom closer. Last week, when the Book of Acts described the Spirit's first appearance to the disciples at Pentecost, we got a taste of what the Spirit's procession might be. (Apparently, it sometimes involves high winds and blasts of divine fire.) From what Jesus tells the disciples in John's Gospel this morning, he, the Father, and the Holy Spirit have their respective roles well worked out. But we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that these three Persons, each with a distinct personality and way of engaging with people, are separate from one another. They aren't three gods in the way that the small-G gods of Olympus or Asgaard were. The three Persons of the Holy Trinity are unified into the one God whom we worship, even if we don't fully understand how their unity works.

We Christians talk a lot about Jesus, as we should. He's the Person of the Trinity who chose to become one of us, the one who walked among us, loved us, taught us, healed us, laid down his life for us, then returned to us in resurrection, proving that death no longer has power over us. He's also a really great guy. It's not hard to give him our grateful devotion. The Holy Spirit may be less relatable than Jesus, but there's no doubt that she's on our side. She's our Advocate, after all, a divine being whose job it is to educate and encourage us in our faith. If we choose to understate the Holy Spirit's power – I don't recommend it, but people do – we can talk about the Spirit as this sort of warm, motherly presence that bathes us in heavenly love, gently urging us to grow in faith. We don't always talk as much or as carefully as we should, however, about the first Person of the Trinity, the Father. This being Father's Day, it seems an especially appropriate time to turn our attention to him.

The Father is the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Creator who brought all things into being. Made in his image, we can envision him in humanlike form. You might picture him as the white-bearded patriarch on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, or as an actor like Charlton Heston in “Almost an Angel” or Morgan Freeman in “Bruce Almighty.” (My personal favorite was George Burns in the “Oh, God” movies. He nailed it.) Unlike the Holy Spirit, the Father has a name – sort of. Our Hebrew cousins consider the divine Name too sacred to speak aloud, which is why I follow their custom of referring to him as Adonai. Strictly speaking, though, Adonai isn’t a name, but a title that translates as “our Lord.” As he told Moses, the Father refers to himself simply as “I AM.” That makes sense because he is and has always been. The Father is the first Person in the Trinity because he existed first and brought the other two into being. All three are immortal, but only the Father has no beginning as well as no end.

We might conclude from the Hebrew Scriptures that the Father has a terrible temper. This is the God who kicked a couple of disobedient kids out of Eden, destroyed almost everything he made in a massive flood, rained fire and sulfur down on Sodom and Gomorrah, and inflicted ten increasingly deadly plagues on Egypt. The Father can be truly terrifying – and Jesus still addresses him as “Abba.” That doesn’t quite translate to “Daddy,” despite what you may have heard, but it’s certainly closer to “Papa” than it is to “Sir.” Jesus clearly isn’t afraid of his Father. Maybe that’s because he, too, is divine and able to stand with him on an equal footing. Then again, maybe it’s because Jesus understands the Father in ways that we don’t. If we can figure those things out, maybe we needn’t be afraid of the Father, either. Respectful, but not afraid.

In a recent radio interview with Terry Gross of “Fresh Air,” Noah Feldman, a Harvard Law professor and author of the book *To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel, and the Jewish People*, observed that throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, “the God of the Hebrew Bible

profoundly loves the children of Israel and is profoundly enraged with the children of Israel pretty much at the same time ... The Father openly admits that he is capable of rage, zeal, and jealousy,” and we see those feelings whenever his chosen people succumb to the lure of other gods. But as Feldman points out, although the Father punishes his people for their lack of faithfulness, they always return to the Father because they’re loved. And much as the Father loathes his people’s infidelity, he keeps taking them back when they stray because he wants a relationship with them more than anything else. My sense is that he feels the same way about us.

If you’re still nervous about the Father, consider this. People love hierarchy, so theologians tend to characterize the Father as preeminent in strength and authority. Athanasias tells us that the three Persons of the Trinity are co-equal. The Father freely shares with his Son; Jesus assures the disciples that “all that the Father has is mine.” The Father’s generosity suggests that his desire is for relationship, not dominance. That, in turn, suggests that the Father doesn’t want cowering obedience from his children. He wants us to obey because we love him.

The unity of the Trinity can’t be duplicated in human relationships, but clergy sometimes invoke the Father as a model for human fathers. That rarely works well. Human fathers make human mistakes, and some are better parents than others. Children shouldn’t expect their fathers to be God, and fathers shouldn’t demand that their kids behave as if they were. But human fathers have the same need for love as our Father in heaven, even when they won’t admit it. It can be a lot easier to love them when we recognize that they, like us, are simply children of the heavenly Father we share. So, if your dad is still with us and you already have plans to see him today, enjoy your time together. If not, maybe give him a call. And whatever your feelings around your earthly Father may be, rejoice in knowing that your Father in heaven loves you. Happy Father’s Day, Abba. Amen.