

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9 | 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 | John 3:16-18
(These verses follow the homily.)

God our Father, who by sending into the world the word of truth and the spirit of sanctification made known to the human race your wondrous mystery, grant us, we pray, in professing the true faith we may acknowledge the trinity of eternal glory and/or your unity, power and majesty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever, amen.

THIS is the second of four Sundays, each of which has a very interesting focus. Last Sunday, the first one I want to remind us about, is the Feast of Pentecost, when we believe God has this strange ability to come and abide within us, to live inside of us. The image is a strong one of light, enlightenment coming into us and being able to communicate something, knowing something without having to use words. It just resonates from within us. Then there is today's Feast of the Trinity, to look at the way God has revealed himself to us, to make sure we really see him as he is, know him, experience him. And then it's the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, the mystery that we, as Catholics in particular, live for, live on. It's the thing we come to mass for in a major way, that we are somehow gifted with an awareness of

God's presence in us, an increasing reality that we both welcome and celebrate. Then we go to an interesting feast, the last, and it's called the Sacred Holy Heart of Jesus, the heart of him. So we look at, in a sense, the effects of the resurrection on us, of God being able to come and dwell within us. We look at the mystery of who God is. Then we look at the mystery of the Eucharist, what liturgy is all about, and then we get, in a sense, to celebrate what is at the heart of this Savior, God's sacred heart.

So today I'd like to focus on the Feast of the Trinity, and try to understand this revelation. It's strange to invite people to believe that God is three — not three, but one. I remember as a child first learning about it. They had all kinds of little metaphors for it. I remember the one with the three matches, and then you put the matches together, and it's

one flame and always trying to somehow give us some way of imagining how three things can become one. But that never worked for me. How can three things be one? If each one is an individual thing, how can three things be one? It's one of those teachings that's there, and I realize it's important, but I don't know that I ever had anyone explain it to me in a way I could grasp the reason for it. Why does God reveal himself as a Father, then a Son, and then as a Spirit, the Holy Spirit?

I want to see if I can share something with you. I don't know if I've ever preached this way. I don't know if I ever said this, but I've been fascinated lately with the whole notion of evolution, how human beings have evolved. It's not so much the issue of who created us. It's not whether God created us in one moment or over a long period of time. I think that's a scientific problem, and I think it's already been solved. But the issue is why do we evolve? Why is it that we are, at one point in our lives, capable of certain things, while at another point in our lives, we are capable of a whole lot of other things? Why is it that the human race is not the same as it was when people were first beginning to stand up and walk? Why have we grown in our capacity to see things, understand things? Why do we seem to become smarter, more aware, more conscious of things that aren't the plan, if that isn't the way the world works, if we don't ever stay the same? *We're constantly moving toward greater awareness, greater consciousness, greater fullness, becoming more than we were.*

What I love about that is it means there's never a time in your life when you say, "I'm finished. I've done it. I've achieved my goal." We continue to grow even after this life. We're told, when we die, we go to another place, and there's continued growth, and we call that place purgation, purification, purgatory. So we're taught that even after death, we're able to evolve and grow.

So if we look at that image of being able to evolve and grow, and if that's the truth, then we look at the way God chose to reveal himself. And when he made himself present to Abraham, which was probably, maybe 5,000 years ago, human beings were at a certain point of their understanding of who they were, and they had certain capacities. I have no idea what they were like, but the interesting thing is they all believed in many gods, most of them, at least the ones God came to talk to. The people knew there were many gods, and they trusted them. They leaned on them, and those gods, being pagan gods, had a certain way of dealing with human beings, and it was pretty universal. The gods were mostly temperamental. They could get angry easily. The people could feel their anger in severe storms and great winds, and there was even a way in which they felt at times they were being punished because of the difficulties they were encountering. They felt that God was angry, so they would try to appease their gods, offering something that was valuable to them. "I'll give up something to God to show him that I

honor him," they said. And one of the things they used to give was children who had been sacrificed. Crazy, but that's what they did, and so when God began to reveal himself, what did he do? He revealed himself first and foremost as a god like the other gods. As every good teacher knows, he began with where we are and he began to tell us, "Well, you know what this is like. Well, what I'm going to bring you to is something like that. So we'll start with that, and then I'm slowly going to change your view of that reality."

So look at the first thing Abraham did when he was called to be leader of his people. He said, "All right, you know what gods ask when they want to give you something, so I'd like you to make a sacrifice, so I want you to kill your son." Now, here's the god that we're asked to believe in acting in a certain way, and if we think that is the fullness of God's revelation — this is who he is. He's a God who can demand anything, even the most horrible thing he would ask us to do, to destroy what we've given life to. People have a hard time with the image that God has in the Old Testament of being like a pagan God, and it has destroyed so many people's trust in this God. How many people have I met in my life who have come to me and said, "I like Jesus, but I just don't like God at all. I just don't like him. He's too harsh." And then I've had even people say, "I like the God of the Old Testament, but Jesus is too demanding." It's as if you were saying, "what were you told about God? What were you told? Who were you told God

is?" The scariest thing about Scripture to me is, if you look at this slow evolution of God moving from a God like all other pagan gods to the God who ultimately reveals himself as one who dwells inside you, empowers you, forgives you and loves you, that movement from those early days in the Old Testament to the final days of revelation, if we don't understand that God, a God who is changing, then one could go to any one of those images, take any one of those stories of the Old Testament — take the one when he gave the Ten Commandments to his people — gave the wisdom of God to his people to tell them who they are and how they should relate to each other and how they should relate to God, and they've gone back to their pagan ways. God said, "I'll kill you all. I'm going to destroy you." You can do a homily on that and make people scared that, if they don't do what they're supposed to be doing, if they ever drift back to the way they used to be, God's ready to kill them.

So you're left with a problem. Does God change? Does he change? No. No, God doesn't change, but God knows his audience. He knows his people. He knows when to take them to the next step, and that's what we're looking at throughout the Old Testament, God slowly revealing who he is. He's not changing. He's not figuring out how to love people, but he keeps changing the relationship in terms of what makes it work. He said, "Well, first, if you don't do what I ask you to do, I'm through with you." Then he says, "Well, that doesn't work, so all right, if you don't

do what I ask you to do, I won't be through with you. I'll keep trying to help you, but you're really separate from me. Once you're on your own, you're on your own. I'll keep trying to help you, and I'll keep trying to come back to you. But if you separate from me, you don't get anything from me until I find you have come back — until I get you back." Then finally he comes up with this incredible promise. "I'll write my law in your hearts. I tell you what to do. I ask you to do it, and you can't do it, so the way I've got to do it is to change you. I've got to transform you. I've got to lift you up into a higher consciousness where you understand. There's something about being who I'm asking you to be, even though I use threats and punishment as a way to get you there. That's the best I can do right now, because that's about all you'll really understand. But I'm going to get you to a place where you're going to understand so much more, but I've got to do something to lift you up, increase your consciousness, understand something. You know what we call that? Redemption — redemption.

So we have first a God who slowly reveals himself to his people, God the Father. That same God took form in order to redeem us, and he became human. And so we have God the Son. What's really difficult about this part of the revelation of who God is, when he came into the world like one of us, he's saying, "First and foremost, you have to understand that I am very much like you, and you're very much like me. We're very similar. We have the same

longings, the same desires. We respond to the same thing: love. I want you to love me. I know you need me to love you. We're similar." And so God is, in the form of a human being, and when I was growing up, I was always taught that God, or rather Jesus, was divine, and that's the word we used. He's divine and human, 100 percent human, 100 percent divine, but if you only look at Jesus as divine, it's hard to imagine what he's trying to teach you, because he's trying to teach you. "I want you to see what it's like for a human being to be filled with my presence, my strength, my love, my commitment to him. Look at what he's able to accomplish. Look at what he's done, and notice how different he is from everyone around you. And notice how he can take you and explain something to you that I couldn't do through the prophets. I had to come and do it through a human being, but he's really the best representation you have of who you are when I'm in you."

So we have in God the Son another level of revelation of who God is, and it's the most important. But then I say that, and I say, "Well, without that, the Old Testament doesn't make a lot of sense. They're all so important, God the Father, the way he revealed himself as Father, judge, demanding and then as brother." And then when Jesus realized his role was to express to human beings who God really was, a moment as significant as when he's treated as poorly as any human being could ever be treated by the people he tried to serve. That's an image of how God sees

us when we don't serve him, and his response? Absolute, total forgiveness with the caveat that I think is so beautiful. He's just saying, "You know what? Human beings act the way they act. They destroy each other. They destroy themselves. They don't know what they're doing." What an incredible basis for forgiveness. They don't know what they're doing.

All through the Old Testament you see God judging. You see God condemning. You see God punishing. Does he presume they know what they're supposed to do? Do they have the capacity to follow God as they were supposed to? Well, the implication is they did. At least God presumed they did. That's the way the story is told. The image of God presumed they could do it. Do it, do it, and they kept failing and failing. It's as if God were saying, "Okay, do you realize what's happening? I'm telling you how I see you and how I work with you." And he works the same way with every individual as the whole story of salvation unfolds. He starts with us as children. He starts by giving us a sense that, if we don't do what we're told, we're going to be punished, but the terror is to me, the terrible thing — it is terror — is that we sometimes stay in that relationship with God when we're still as if he's our judging Father, and we're his children, and we're always in trouble. It's as if we don't understand how he evolved into this creature, this God, who lives inside a human, and we see that's the example of who we are to become. And then ultimately he reveals

himself in this extraordinary way by saying, "Well, what I really want you to feel, my goal from the day I called Abraham, was I wanted you to know that I'm pure Spirit, and I can enter into you, and I will abide in you. And I will partner with you, and I will have a relationship with you as real as if you were sitting there talking to someone else." That's the fullness of the story.

If you don't go through these stages of God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit, you don't understand exactly who each one of them is. I didn't know. But they're one. The God who is Spirit is the same as God who is Father. The same God who is the Son is the same God who is the Spirit and the Father. It's why you need to have imagination so much in this work of spirituality. Without imagination you can't work, because we're — at least I live in the world where I have to figure out things. I have to see the logic behind them. I have to work with things in the world. If I don't use logic and I don't use cause and effect, I am completely lost. When it comes to the world of the spirit, without imagination, without beginning to be able to let go of how something works, but believe that it does work — that's the key. And I think, when Jesus revealed himself as the Son of God and God revealed himself as the Son and then the Spirit comes to reveal to us who God the Father, God the Son is, all of that is so confusing to the logical brain that you have to say, "Wait a minute. Can I imagine that this is a story about one God revealing himself to me?" Yes, he did it over history, but

unless you see the story of salvation as it's in the Old and the New Testament, you don't understand that most of us will have with God if we're open to it, if we can imagine it working in the way he revealed it. What a gift, to have something like this image to ponder and to wonder and to imagine, because without it — and this is the danger of all religion — it ends up being a very simple, practical situation of doing what you're told and being rewarded; don't do what you're told and be punished. If there's anything I could do to get you to let go of that, it would be wonderful, because it's there as the block, and this God who lives inside you, how could he

not forgive you? Because he's part of you, and if he condemns you, he condemns himself in a sense. He's one with us. Keep playing with it. It gets richer and richer if you can say, "Wait a minute. What is oneness when there are two? Is it possible?" We say that about marriage. The two are one. Well, does that mean the husband is the wife and the wife is the husband? Kind of, yeah, sort of. Imagine what that would feel like. Well, imagination and understanding of the mystery, are enough to say: "I see why. I just don't know how," is the beginning of real faith.

Father, you sent your Son into the world to open our eyes so we'd be free and not so burdened, and I know what you longed for him to show us is who you are, your love, your patience, your understanding, most especially your willingness to walk with us through this life. Bless us the deeper awareness of this. Don't let us fall into the trap of seeing only part of you and not seeing the fullness of how you revealed yourself to us, and we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9

Early in the morning Moses went up Mount Sinai as the LORD had commanded him, taking along the two stone tablets.

Having come down in a cloud, the LORD stood with Moses there and proclaimed his name, "LORD."

Thus the LORD passed before him and cried out, "The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity."

Moses at once bowed down to the ground in worship. Then he said, "If I find favor with you, O Lord,

do come along in our company.
This is indeed a stiff-necked people; yet pardon our wickedness and sins,
and receive us as your own."

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Brothers and sisters, rejoice.
Mend your ways, encourage one another,
agree with one another, live in peace,
and the God of love and peace will be with you.
Greet one another with a holy kiss.
All the holy ones greet you.

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

John 3:16-18

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him might not perish
but might have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.
Whoever believes in him will not be condemned,
but whoever does not believe has already been condemned,
because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.