

# the Sunday readings



The Trinity by Reblev ( 1370 – 1430 )

## Trinity Sunday

TRINITY SUNDAY (a)

## ***the blessed and holy Trinity*** <sup>1</sup>

### introduction

Between the feast of *Pentecost* and the return to *Ordinary Time* (and the systematic reading of Matthew's gospel) there are two Sundays when we celebrate two fundamental doctrines of our faith – the mystery of *the Blessed Trinity* and *the Body and Blood of Christ* (*Corpus Christi*). The mysteries of the blessed Trinity and the holy Eucharist, underpin and shape our Christian discipleship and mission.

Like disciples in every age, we reflect on the reality of *the Triune GOD*. Jesus invited disciples to come into a partnership with him in order to extend the divine work.<sup>2</sup> Deeper into his farewell speech he speaks of revealing GOD's name to those who were given him by his Father.<sup>3</sup> He prays for them to remain true to the divine name, in their practice. The image of partnership with the GOD whose name is revealed by Jesus, outlines the task to which we disciples are called. Jesus' prayer extends the work he was given by the Father. He prays for a unity of destiny for all believers just as there is a unity of destiny between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> Today's texts are our point of entry into the sources of imagery by which we believe in order to understand our faith, worship, and mission.

first reading: Exodus 34 : 4 – 6, 8 – 9 <sup>5</sup>

*So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.(4) The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name, "The LORD."(5) The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a GOD merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.(6)*

*Exodus* assumes that the conditions for allegiance to the LORD GOD had been dictated orally and were already known. Writing them down confirms that the original arrangements now apply in new circumstances. In Canaan, the Israelites faced pressure to succumb to the oppressive politics and exploitative religion that held sway there. Earlier, the LORD GOD communicated to Moses GOD's own essential being in the name, "*I Am Who I Am*".<sup>6</sup> The interpretation of the word '*the LORD GOD*', for the name, is given (see v.14b) and could mean, "*I Am what I Am*". That is; GOD does not wish to reveal the name! But it could mean, "*I Am*,

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<sup>1</sup> Front Cover image: Trinity by Russian iconographer Rublev. Rublev lived from about 1370 until 1430. The icon depicts the recognition and veneration by Abraham of GOD as three Persons. Genesis 18 tells of three young men, or angels, arriving at the home of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham falls down on his knees, recognising the Holy Ones and addresses just one of the men/angels. Curiously, the Scriptures tell us that these three respond sometimes in the singular, when "He" responds for all three and sometimes in the plural, when "they" respond as one. The original icon is now housed in the Tretyakov Museum, Moscow.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Jn.* 14:10-12

<sup>3</sup> *Jn.* 17:6 7 & v.11

<sup>4</sup> *Jn.* 17:22-26

<sup>5</sup> The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ex.* 3:14a

*Who Am*”, and the translators of the Septuagint understood it as; *“I Am He, Who Is”*, or *“I Am the One Who Exists”*, implying that the LORD GOD is the only truly existent being.

It means GOD is completely *other* and remains a mystery for humankind. It also means the LORD GOD acts in the history of the chosen people and in world history and guides the course of events towards their completion.<sup>7</sup> It means that communication with GOD is renewed after the Israelite failure to keep the original conditions of the covenant.<sup>8</sup> Moses has petitioned, interceded, protested, cajoled and delivered ultimatums to GOD.<sup>9</sup> We usually regard Moses as the law-giver, *par excellence*. He’s presented in *Exodus* as a relentless petitioner, prepared to intimidate even GOD; to assault the divine throne until GOD yields to the needs of the Israelites. In the midst of this determined speech, GOD responds revealing GOD's characteristic way of acting; with mercy, compassion, patience, faithfulness and constancy (vv.6-7a).

*(And) Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped.(8)*  
*He said, “If now I have found favour in your sight, O LORD, I pray, let the LORD go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”(9)*

GOD's speech brings a response of respectful worship from Moses (v.8) and a plea for leniency on behalf of the Israelites (v.9). The lectionary compiler (also merciful and gracious towards us readers) leaves out the passage that has GOD threaten to make people pay for their sins to the third and fourth generation! Moses plays at brinkmanship and it works! Because GOD is merciful and compassionate, the original conditions of partnership are restored and something new and saving can happen because of Moses' mediation. Life in GOD's world is shaped by mercy and compassion. These qualities violate the assumed ‘real’ world with its rigid calculus about life that accepts the present oppressive arrangements.

Moses and his people had learned that remaining silent meant heavier slavework quotas. Their silence merely increased their oppression. In fact, GOD has replaced Pharaoh and all other pretenders to rulership. In a new situation the same vigorous response in the pattern shown by Moses will be required. Such prayers would exclude any temptation to self-sufficiency or blind docility. Silence in the face of any powerful agent will lead to new enslavements. The urgent pattern of Moses' prayer, makes new life possible, and reveals GOD is in control.

response: Psalm = Daniel 3 : 52 – 57 <sup>10</sup>

*Blessed are you, O LORD, the GOD of our fathers,  
praiseworthy and exalted above all forever; And  
blessed is your holy and glorious name, praiseworthy*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Rv.1:8*

<sup>8</sup> See *Ex.32*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid. 32 & Ex.33:13-14*

<sup>10</sup> These verses (vv.52-57) are inspired additions to the Aramaic text – the song which Shadrach, Meshach and AbedNego, sang in the furnace.

*and exalted above all for all ages.(52) Blessed are you in the temple of your holy glory, praiseworthy and glorious above all forever.(53) Blessed are you on the throne of your kingdom, praiseworthy and exalted above all forever.(54) Blessed are you who look into the depths from your throne upon the cherubim, praiseworthy and exalted above all forever.(55) Blessed are you in the firmament of heaven, praiseworthy and glorious forever.(56) Bless the LORD, all you works of the LORD, praise and exalt him above all forever.(57)*

King Nebuchadnezzar symbolises any oppressive power. Earlier (cf. *Dn.3*) Nebuchadnezzar wanted the Israelites to simply bow down and treat the imperial system as absolute and normal. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego are hopers who trust the LORD GOD's name. They believe there's a future yet to be given that is beyond Nebuchadnezzar's control. Shadrach, Meshach and AbedNego speak out to deny that the future belongs to Nebuchadnezzar. Their denial is based on the following logic:

*Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our GOD, whom we serve, can deliver us from the burning furnace, and will deliver us from out of your hands - but if not - know, O King, we will still not bow down to you.* (Dn.3:17-18)

The king was furious at this statement of the three young men (v.19). It represented the dramatic end to his royal claims. It ended his capacity to intimidate them. The hope of the three young men focuses on the name of their LORD GOD. It is the LORD GOD who provides them with the reason not to submit to the king's order. The logic of their answer and their song of praise to the LORD as they move unscathed through the fiery furnace, keeps open a critical freedom of imagination for the faithful community. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Negos' trust in the LORD, provides a pattern for all following generations. A pattern for all to avoid yielding the last ounce of their lives in bowing down before all '*pretenders*' to *the true power for life-giving*. The song's recurring refrain, exhorts all creatures, animate and inanimate, to praise the name of the LORD GOD.

second reading: 2 Corinthians 13 : 11 – 13

*Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.(11) Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.(12) The grace of the LORD Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.(13)*

Critics in the Corinthian community had challenged the authority and integrity of the apostle Paul, who had been their first teacher. This is his response. His detractors had accused him of being weak,<sup>11</sup> deceitful,<sup>12</sup> and poorly spoken.<sup>13</sup> In preparation for his coming meeting with them, the apostle proposes that they put themselves to a test, to see whether they are holding to their faith.<sup>14</sup> Paul affirms that the test for the authenticity of his own

work is whether his witness to the Gospel has enabled them (the Corinthians) to be strong in their faith.<sup>15</sup> He then asks them to consider their own performance and gives them a measure of what an authentic community of Christian disciples would look like.

The apostle implies that the harmonious and peaceful example of a disciple's life reproduces the same characteristics in other community members and viceversa. When life is lived authentically; when it is communal, reciprocal, complete; it shares characteristics of the divine life. Paul wrote to have the letter read out at the Christian assembly. So the apostle ends his letter with an exhortation to make, '*the gesture of shalom*', that prepares the way for the celebration of Eucharist, which would follow hearing the letter read in the assembly.

This appeal for peace is one of the clearest trinitarian passages in the New Testament. The order of experience for Christians is firstly: *the grace of Jesus Christ*; then *the love of GOD* and then *the communion (koinonia) of the Holy Spirit*. It is in Jesus' life and death that Christian disciples encounter the love of GOD. This encounter leads to incorporation into a redeemed community in which the disciples participate in *the communal life of Jesus' spirit/Spirit*.

gospel reading: John 3 : 16 – 18<sup>16</sup>

*For GOD so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, may not perish, but may have eternal life.(16)*

Nicodemus represents all managers of the status quo. Whether dealing with religious or economic affairs, managers of the status quo tend to cover up incongruities and failures of the system, because they don't expect anything better. Jesus defines GOD's love for the world as the Father's giving of the Only-

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11 See 2 Co.10:10

12 2 Co.12:16

13 2 Co.11:6

14 2 Co.13:5

15 *Ibid.*13:8-9

16 The evangelist describes the closeness of Father and Son in a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

begotten Son. Believing in him, means *eternal life*. John the evangelist has a very negative attitude towards *the world* as the place of *no-life* and *darkness*. Before Jesus' divine mission, the world belongs to the darkness that has sought and failed to *overcome the light*.<sup>11</sup> It is *this world* that is the object of the divine love; and it is to rescue it from the darkness that GOD, in a supreme act of love, has sent the Son into the world to be it's Light:

*Indeed, GOD did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.(17) Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of GOD.(18)*

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<sup>11</sup> See Jn.1:5

Because the world has become so alienated from GOD, it takes an exceedingly great love to love it at all. GOD's '*giving of the Son*' hints that this sending will end in his death; death on the cross. The incarnation, described in the prologue of John's Gospel, plays itself out in redemption – the rescue of human beings from death – so that they may share in the divine, *eternal life*.

Believers in the Son, in contrast with those who trust in *the present system*, will find new energy. Jesus has been asking, if people don't believe him when he talks to them about *worldly matters (things you see every day)*, how will they believe him if he talks to them about *the things of heaven*?<sup>12</sup> Jesus was talking about the things of Earth - about change and a new birthing here and now. *Eternal life* in John's gospel means *a life we can lead now* on Earth. John wrote in one of his letters; "*I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of GOD, so that you may know that you have eternal life*".<sup>13</sup> Without belief in *the only Son of GOD* a person is condemned already (v.18 & v.36).

Father and Son are characterised by their generosity and availability to each other and to the world. Jesus' words clarify that the divine community works as one to redeem the lost. The Spirit is at work in bringing about an experience of new birth (vv.3:4-8). Jesus identifies *the reigning (or kingdom) of GOD* with life in himself (vv.15-16). Since he is *Son of man*, or *the Human one* (vv.13-14) and *Son of GOD* (vv.16-18) the complete partnership of the divine family is present in the work of redemption. Father, Son and Spirit are available for the lost ones.

The politics of the Bible is the communion of all the world with all things in common. For this, a would-be disciple of Jesus needs a new birth. Paul exhorts his disciples to throw off their old ways and clothe themselves in the new. "*Have no distinctions between Israelite and non-Israelite, between masters and slaves, between males and females*".<sup>14</sup> Wherever there is a community of love – that's heaven! Where there are no divisions; no selfishness; no deceit – that's *eternal life!!*

Jesus' speech to Nicodemus (vv.17-18) contradicts all the prophets of doom, who lament that the world is past mending and who confidently predict that the world is going to be destroyed in a last judgement. Jesus comes to mend the world, not to destroy it. The Greek root (*krisis/krinesthai*) is an ambiguous term. It can mean both *judgement* and *condemnation* (v.17). Jesus' purpose is to save but his coming provokes judgement. Some condemn themselves by turning from the light. Judgement already exists in this life. Those who don't believe in Jesus are the ones who don't love. Elsewhere, Jesus speaks of judgement, saying: "*I was hungry and you never gave me food: I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink, I was homeless and you never gave me shelter, naked and you never clothed me, sick and in prison, and you never visited me*".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jn. 3:12

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 1 Jn.5:13

<sup>14</sup> Ga. 3:28

<sup>15</sup> See Mt.25:42-43

Jesus goes on talking about *light* and *darkness* (vv.19-21). People who act to cover up their practices are the ones who want the present arrangement of power and goods and access to remain as they are. Their activity in maintaining *the system* has to be kept secret. They want others to be kept in ignorance. They hate the light. They don't want their exploitation to be discovered. They even make religion itself serve to cover up the reality. Jesus is speaking at night. Nicodemus came to speak to him secretly, because he was an important member of the Jewish Supreme Council. There was conflict between the people of his position of power and Jesus. It was like the conflict between darkness and light. During this night-time conversation Nicodemus receives *light*. Afterwards it was Nicodemus who defended Jesus in the Sanhedrin. for sharing <sup>16</sup>

- *The Christian community is the revelation in the world of the tenderness and the compassion of GOD.* Comment on Exodus 34 : 6
- *Love presupposes a vision of oneself in the other and of the other in oneself.* Comment on 2 Corinthians 13 : 11
- *Eternal life is something experienced here and now.* Comment on John 3 : 16

prayer <sup>17</sup>

*Merciful and gracious Father, You  
showed the fullness of Your love when  
You gave Your only Son  
for our salvation and sent  
down upon us the power  
of Your Spirit.  
Complete within us the work of Your love,  
that we who have communion in Christ may  
come to share fully the undying life he lives  
with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
GOD, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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<sup>16</sup> Lectio Divina : reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us through reflection. The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet place, a passage of Scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. We suggest using all or part of the gospel readings of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. *Lectio (reading)* – the passage of scripture is read slowly, more than once. If a particular word, phrase or sentence seems significant – even if we don't know why – we can write it down. *Meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill the mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD'S presence. We let the Holy Spirit lead us to understand the words. *Oratio (prayer)* – We allow our heart to speak to GOD in words inspired by the Scripture passage, or by the thoughts that have come to us while reflecting on it. *Contemplatio (rest)* – we let go of ideas and words and allow ourselves to rest in the presence of GOD in simple and wordless contemplation. This commentary gives a brief context and some comments on each of the readings and the psalm used in the liturgy of the Sunday. .

<sup>17</sup> The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

review<sup>18</sup>

Reflecting on the mystery of the Trinity we remember Jesus' call for us to come into partnership with him to extend the divine work. He prayed that the disciples would remain true to the divine name in all that they did.

We often fail to reveal the Father's tenderness and compassion in our dealings with our sisters and brothers. Jesus prayed for a unity of destiny among all believers, just as there is a unity of destiny between Father, Son and holy Spirit. We fail to believe in community and narrow the circle of those we care about. The psalmist sings about GOD's utter freedom from our world; and GOD's utter attentiveness to our world. We fail to '*read*' GOD's creation rightly. We are often disloyal to the Holy Spirit.

O Trinity of Persons, one eternal GOD, through WORD and Eucharist, empower us in the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ, the love of GOD, and in the communion of the Holy Spirit, that we may become active partners in doing GOD's creating, redeeming and empowering will in our world, until we gather again.

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<sup>18</sup> Review – at the end of each reflection the review examines the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.