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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
May 26, 2024
Holy Trinity Sunday

Sisters and brothers, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, Christianity is a peculiar faith.

Christianity is a peculiar faith.

For as long as Christianity has been around, people have not known what to make of Christianity.

For instance, in the early days of Christianity, there were rumors going around in the ancient Roman Empire that Christian followers were cannibals.

Why? Because Christians spoke of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their God.

So, Christianity got something of a bad reputation.

Furthermore, early Christians were seen as anti-social.

Why? Because Christians did not participate in the pagan religions of the ancient Roman Empire, which were as much a social outlet as a religious outlet.

To participate in the pagan religions was to interact and to form social bonds with other people.

But Christians shied away from such activities because of their faith in Christ Jesus, and as a result, Christians were seen as anti-social.

And still more, Christians were seen as atheists, the very first atheists, mind you.

Why? Because Christians did not participate in the worship of the pagan Roman gods.

Instead they worshipped a man, name Jesus.

They worshipped a man, not a divine being, so people thought, and so Christians were seen as atheists.

So, yes, Christianity is a peculiar faith.

And, people have not been sure what to make of Christianity.

Later on, when Islam entered the scene, Christianity was seen as having strayed from the truth about God.

Christians were seen as polytheists by Muslims, which is still the case today.

Muslims view Christians as polytheists, that is, as worshippers of more than one God.

After all Christians profess that they believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Three gods, right? Well no, not exactly. We worship one God who reveals God's self as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And then there is this “fully God, fully human” thing with respect to Jesus.

How can that be? How can it be that Jesus is both 100% human and 100% divine? Is Jesus somehow two entities—sometimes human and sometimes God?

No, Jesus is both human and divine mashed together.

Indeed, we see how peculiar the Christian faith is.

People just don't know what to make of it.

PAUSE

Take Nicodemus, for instance.

Here is this first century Jew in the Gospel reading, who is a “seeker” by all accounts of the word.

He is seeking out Jesus.

He is seeking understanding. He is seeking clarity.

He wants to know more about Jesus, who he is and what he is about.

PAUSE

Now, Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus is a teacher, who has come from God.

Nicodemus also recognizes that Jesus is empowered by God to do signs.

He says as much, “No one can do these signs you do apart from the presence of God.”

PAUSE

But Nicodemus wants more information. He wants the 4-1-1. He wants the low-down, the scoop, the whole story.

And so, Jesus begins to explain to him, that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Which to Nicodemus’ mind must sound like complete and utter nonsense.

Nicodemus asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

“Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Yes, Christianity is a peculiar faith.

But Jesus, of course, is not speaking about being born in the traditional sense of the word.

Jesus is speaking about baptism.

He says to Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being BORN of WATER and the SPIRIT.”

PAUSE

Interesting... that baptism is likened to being born.

Now, baptism and birth are similar in some ways.

Both events signify a beginning.

In birth, we begin life in this world. In baptism, we begin life in God.

At the time of birth, though, something else significant happens—we receive our name.

For Jews, the naming ceremony of a child takes place on the eighth day after a child has been born.

And so, the Festival of the Name of Jesus on our liturgical calendar is celebrated on January 1, which is the eighth day of the Christmas season.

And if we stop and think about it, the naming of a child is a most remarkable event.

For parents to give their child a name is truly extraordinary.

It is THE identifying characteristic that will follow that human being around throughout the rest of their lives.

That is how that human being will be known. It is how they will be addressed. (Unless of course, the person decides to change their name, but that's another story.)

The Bible even speaks of God knowing our name, according to Isaiah 43:1.

So, our name attaches to us and it is not just the name we have in this life, but it is the name we have for all eternity.

Again, think about how extraordinary that is.

PAUSE

Now, in baptism, we also receive another name.

When we receive the water and the Spirit, we speak of being baptized into the name of the Triune God.

Over each of us were spoken the words, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And, my guess is that this is why we have this text from John, chapter 3, today, on this Holy Trinity Sunday.

The text from John 3 speaks of being born again, and in being born again, the text alludes to baptism.

And in baptism, the Triune name of God becomes attached to us.

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But what does that mean for us?

What impact does God's name have for our life?

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Well, in the ancient world, it was believed that to know the name of other-worldly beings, like gods, like demons, was to have some sense of power over them.

We may recall the story of the demoniac, who lived among the tombs in the country of the Gerasenes.

We may remember that Jesus comes upon this man, this man who would howl day and night, and who would injure himself with stones.

Jesus comes upon this man, and Jesus asks the demon inside the man, "What is your name?"

And the demon replies, "Legion, for we are many."

There are many demons in this man.

And if we didn't know a Roman legion contained between 4,000 and 6,000 soldiers.

So, in other words, there are a lot of demons in this man.

And, now, knowing the name of the demons, Jesus proceeds to send this Legion of Demons into some pigs.

And the pigs completed pigicide, they run off the steep bank into the sea.

It is a fascinating story, on many accounts.

But the one point to highlight for us is the fact that Jesus is able to name the demons that possess the man, and as such is then able to have power over the demons.

PAUSE

So, when we are baptized into God's name, there is a sense that God is giving us some power over God's very being.

To know God's name is to have some power over God.

The ancients understood this to be true because of what they observed in daily life—to address another person by name resulted in that other person giving their attention.

That is a sense of the power that comes with knowing another's name, so why should it be any different with God.

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Now, in the Old Testament, that becomes something of a challenge for the ancient Jews.

For at some point in the history of Judaism, the Jewish faith decided it was not appropriate for humans to speak God's name, because God's name was too holy.

And, it may have been that to address God by God's name, so as to have power over God, diminished the omnipotence of God. Who knows for sure.

Regardless, God's name became off-limits.

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Nevertheless, Christians are given God's name, are actually baptized into God's name, and as a result we have this powerful relationship with God, such that we can call God by name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and we understand that God gives us God's attention.

To be sure, yes, we Christians have this profound relationship with God, for to be in relationship with another, means to know another by name, so that we can address them, that we engage with them, so that we can interact with them.

PAUSE

So, just as we have a name that has been attached to us for all eternity, God has a name attached to God.

And that name is what is truly powerful and truly mysterious about this Holy Trinity Sunday.

As strange and peculiar it is that God is Three-in-One, and One-in-Three, which is what we often tend to focus on this Sunday.

And we hear about such triune images like that of an apple which consist of skin, flesh and seeds, but still one apple.

Or images like that of an egg, which is shell, yolk, and white, but still one egg.

We hear these images about the Trinity, and we try to make sense of the mystery that is one God in three persons.

But again, the real power and mystery of this Sunday is the Triune NAME of God.

We have been given that name.

And so, our God which might otherwise seem so removed, so distant, so detached from us...

Our God is abundantly present and near us, because we have God's name by which we can call to God.

So, we are to make frequent use of God's holy name in prayer, in devotion, in worship—for by doing so we draw closer in relationship to God, and God draws closer to us.

But, on the other hand, we are always to be mindful to refrain from indifferently using God's holy name as some byword, or swear word, or pejorative.

God's name is holy, and God has entrusted his name to us.

So yes, Christianity is a most peculiar faith.

It is most peculiar because we the followers of Christianity are baptized into God's name that we might know God's name, and might therefore engage with God and the world by making faithful use of God's name.

Thanks be to God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.