

## The Feast for the Mystery of the Holy Trinity

### John 3:1-15

We observe today the Feast for the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, that is: we celebrate the mysterious truth that God is three persons, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and these three are One, so that although God is three persons, there is but one God; and although there is but one God, and He is three persons, each and every one of these persons is Himself fully and completely God rather than just part of God. A very mysterious mystery indeed.

Now, I am aware that it might seem like poor style to refer to a *mystery* as being *mysterious*; one should think that if a mystery were not *mysterious*, it would not be a *mystery*. And as such, it would seem that it would be pointless to use the word *mysterious* to describe a *mystery*, and unnecessary, like talking about a *true fact* or a *famous celebrity*, or an *iconic picture*, like another one of those meaningless and useless phrases poor writers use to make it seem sensational, whatever triviality they are writing about, or just to make their sentences longer and make themselves seem smarter than they actually are. We call such phrases *double whammies*; although educated people eager to appear educated might prefer to refer to them as *pleonasms* or *tautologies*. The thing is, though, that in the language of Holy Scripture, a *mystery* is something other than what we normally refer to as being *mysterious*. A *mystery*, or in New Testament Greek: *mysterion*, is not something that it is difficult to work out and understand; it is more like what we would call a *secret*, something that is not known to all, but only to those to whom it has been made known by somebody who knew.

When it comes to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, though, while it is a *mystery*, that is: a *secret* made known by God in Holy Scripture, it also remains *mysterious*, and very much so, in the sense that it is not only difficult for the human mind to work out and understand, but outright *impossible*.

In this sense, our Confession says of this truth: that *Christ is and remains to all eternity God and man in one undivided person*, that *next to the Holy Trinity, this is the highest mystery, upon which our only consolation, life, and salvation depends*. And with that, it also says that the one God being three persons, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and each of these three persons being wholly and completely God rather than only partially so, that that is the highest mystery of all.

So this truth: that God is Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are each wholly and completely God, and yet there is but one God, it is not only a *mystery*, but also a *mysterious* one; it is a secret God has made known in Holy Scripture, which nevertheless also remains *mysterious*, impossible for the human mind to comprehend.

So why celebrate it? In fact, why bother with it at all? Is it not mostly of interest for the exceptionally intellectual or educated Christians, and for theologians in particular?

Again, our Confession says of this truth: that *Christ is and remains to all eternity God and man in one undivided person, that next to the Holy Trinity, this is the highest mystery, upon which our only consolation, life, and salvation depends.* And with that, it is also said that this mystery also, that God is Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are each wholly and completely God, and yet there is but one God, that this mystery also is one upon which our only consolation, life, and salvation depends. In other words, our salvation depends upon it. Now, this does not mean that our salvation depends upon how well we understand it; but our salvation does depend upon it being *true*.

This is also what we learn from what we hear today of the Word of God. A Pharisee came to our Lord Jesus. In greeting Him, he acknowledged our Lord Jesus as a teacher sent from God. This shows us that he came to our Lord Jesus to talk to Him about the way of righteousness, as Pharisees would do, and learn from Him about how one is to live to be righteous and right with God.

And the response of our Lord Jesus made it clear that what a human being needs to be righteous and right with God is so much more than to be taught how to live and behave: *Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.* Nothing less will do than an entirely and completely new beginning, a new life.

But how can we bring that about? Or as Nicodemus put it: *How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?* From what we hear today we learn that this is not for us to bring about at all, that it must be from God, and from God alone: *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* In other words, any attempt on the part of a sinner to make himself right with God, or herself, it is not only futile, it is, in fact, sinful in itself, an attempt to take for oneself that which it belongs to God alone to give.

Any attempt on our part to make ourselves righteous and right with God is an attempt to realise the ancient false promise of the evil one, that we ourselves be equal and alike to God in mastering good and evil. It is born of the flesh, that is: of sinful nature. *And that which is born of the flesh is flesh.*

To be born anew is not something you can work in yourself by our own choice and decision to *make Jesus Lord of your life*, as if it were up to you to decide whether He is Lord or not, or by your efforts and attempts at living a new life. The new life by which sinners are made righteous and right with God must be from God, and from God alone.

As we hear it today that our Lord Jesus said it: *No one has ascended to Heaven except He who came down from Heaven, that is: the Son of Man who is in Heaven.* Among men, only the Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity, has ever made it, and could ever make it, to live so as to make Himself righteous and right with God. And this He has done, although He was forever the Holy One of God, ever righteous, and the Father's Beloved, in whom there never was sin, nor evil.

He came down from Heaven and was made Man, and born as a Man, to live the life all men owe it to God to live, in full and complete love for God, and trust and obedience. *And, as we also hear it today that He said it, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should have eternal life.*

The Son of God was crucified, lifted up high toward Heaven, presented to God for His judgement, and judged and damned for the sin of the world. For He had had Himself baptised with sinners, and baptised into our sin, to be, as the one who had baptised Him would refer to Him, *the Lamb of God who bears and takes away the sin of the world.* In His Baptism He took upon Himself the sin of all sinners to bear it for us, and His own judgement against it, eternal death and damnation, the righteous wrath of God against sin, His holy hatred of evil.

As Israel in the wilderness were saved from the serpents by looking to an image of a serpent, so sinners are saved by looking to *Him who knew of no sin*, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it, whom *God made to be sin for us in order that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*

And for us to look to Him in faith, that is not our own doing either; not even when we hear the testimony from God, who is Father and Son and Holy Spirit. As we hear it today that our Lord Jesus said it: *We speak what we know and testify to what we have seen, and you do not receive our witness.*

It is not in our nature to receive that which is from God. God Himself must work it in us, and does work it in us, when and where He will, by the Holy Spirit. *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.* The Holy Spirit is the breath and life of God; in both the Biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew, the words for *breath* and the words for *spirit* are the same. And only when one is born of the Spirit will he or she have the life of God in himself, or herself. Only then can one see the Kingdom of God, that is: see His salvation and enter the Kingdom of God. Salvation must be from God, and from God only, or we will not be saved; we will not be righteous and right with God so as to live with Him for ever in His Kingdom rather than perish and suffer for ever in His judgement and damnation.

As we hear it today that our Lord Jesus said it: *Most assuredly I say to you: unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.* Now, if we remember, it will be obvious to us that these words echo what He said when little children were brought to Him: *Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a small child shall not enter it.*

What our Lord Jesus sets before us with what we hear today is His salvation, given to us in Baptism as the gracious gift of God, and nothing other than that, that which we cannot and do not and are in no way allowed to take for ourselves, to which we cannot and do not and are in no way allowed to contribute ourselves, which is exactly the reason He has taught His Church to have also her little ones baptised, those obviously and utterly unable to make any contribution of their own: *Let the little children come to me, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God!*

Salvation is of God alone. Our Saviour is God Himself, the Son, whom the Father sent for our salvation, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born, and baptised into us, crucified and raised anew, for our salvation; and this we are made to believe, and to own when God Himself comes to us and lives in us, with His Holy Spirit, His very own life and self.

This is the highest mystery, that of the Holy Trinity, upon which our only consolation, life, and salvation depends. And as little as we understand it, it is well worth celebrating. So good is God; and our salvation is certain and secure because it is true that God is that good.

We have seen the true light; we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith. Let us worship the undivided Trinity, for *He* has saved us.