

Scripture Readings for Sunday June 7 2020

Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Colossians 1:15-20 (NIV)

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Colossians 2:6-10 (NIV)

⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. ⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.

Sermon: The Supremacy of Jesus Christ

As you already know, today is Trinity Sunday. We're just over half through the liturgical year, and after Lent and the events of Easter week, followed by the Ascension and Pentecost, we pause to take a breath and regain perspective before continuing on. Trinity Sunday is, then, an appropriate moment to consider the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and to reflect on the Christian understanding of the nature of God. Let's be honest here, many people struggle with the Church's doctrine of the Trinity. It *is* confusing. We say God is "One" and then we say God is "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." And that doesn't sound particularly *logical*! Consequently, we hope we're never asked about it because we would struggle to explain *why* we believe in the Trinity!¹ And yes, it *is* strange that the Church's orthodox doctrines and traditional creeds stress the "Trinity," yet that word itself does *not* appear in the Bible – I'll come back to that in a moment.

Throughout Church History, one of the differences between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Church has been over nuanced meanings of the Trinity. In the Latin West, we have stressed the Oneness of God first, with the trinitarian aspect added on like a thin veneer; the Greek East have the emphasis the other way around. In our Western heritage, with the rise of the science and the Enlightenment during the 1700 and 1800's, the Trinity essentially became fragmented. God became the distant Creator,² Jesus was reduced to a good moral teacher, and the embarrassing Holy "Ghost" of the King James' Bible was largely forgotten or seen as impersonal.³ This [deistic] legacy still influences and haunts the Church today. And the influential Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner (1904–1984), was right to lament: "Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists.'"⁴ With that background of *rationalized* faith,⁵ one which decries *mystery* in the Divine life and still influences Christian theology today, it is no surprise, then, that when the Jehovah Witness' began in the late 1870's, they *also* denied the Trinity – and still do. For the Witnesses,' Jesus is *not* divine and the Spirit is not a person, but an "it," a divine *force* or *energy* for good in the world. That latter rhetoric is not uncommon in contemporary "spirituality," and you still hear it amongst Christians too. Thankfully, the doctrine of the Trinity has had a resurgence in the West over the last 60 years. We always need to be careful *not* to make God in our own image; such a "God" is no God at all, but an idol. The doctrine of the Trinity is, then, a *confessional* statement of *faith*; it is *not* something we can prove, and it reminds us that there will always be an element of mystery to God.

¹ See Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* Eugene: Cascade, 2018, 17-28; Hauerwas and Willimon, *Holy Spirit*, Nashville: Abingdon, 2015, 1-31.

² i.e., Deism.

³ In Greek, "Spirit" (*pneuma*) is gender neutral (neuter) and hence some claim that as evidence for the Holy Spirit being impersonal (an "it"). However, the Greek word for (pre-pubescent) "child" (*teknon*) is also neuter! Now while it is true that children were regarded as "property" to the head of the house, we today would certainly say children are *persons*!

⁴ Rahner, *The Trinity*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1970, 10. He continues: "We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged." Ibid., 10–11. I would add that even those who hold a "high" Christology, and so recognize the divinity of Christ, are often *functionally* "binitarians," with the dove of the Spirit having flown away.

⁵ i.e., a merger of Rationalism and Christianity.

As I mentioned earlier, it's true that the word "Trinity" is not to be found in the Bible.⁶ But that *doesn't* mean it's a completely foreign idea *to* the New Testament. For example, Paul signs off his second letter to the Corinthians with the well-known benediction, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."⁷ And as we heard earlier in Christ's Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*"⁸ For both Paul and Matthew, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *all* linked together and evidently their audiences understood their importance in the liturgical life of the Church. Matthew also uses the phrase, "in the name of," which means "in the *authority* of" the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If nothing else, from texts like these, the Spirit can be appreciated as a *person*, rather than a force-field, and his traditional role is to *sanctify* the people of God.⁹ Indeed, there are other passages that suggest the Spirit is a person too.¹⁰ Perhaps this is most notable in John's Gospel where Jesus says to his followers, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you *another* advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept *him*, because it neither sees *him* nor knows *him*. But you know *him*, for he lives with you and will be in you."¹¹ The Spirit here is said to be *another* advocate, or Comforter, because Jesus is the *first* advocate.¹² Enough said!

The New Testament has much more to say about the relationship between Jesus and God the Father.¹³ Put bluntly, in the decades that followed the resurrection, followers of the risen Christ came to believe that Jesus is divine; he is God *enfleshed*. Those today who just want Jesus to be a "good teacher" find this uncomfortable, even offensive. What I have discovered to my surprise over the last 2½ years of ministry is that there are far more hints in the New Testament that point to the *divinity* of Jesus that I thought. In fact, some are quite blatant when you consider the *meaning* of words. Now this is a disturbing problem to religious moralists because in our pluralistic society of many faiths, inter-faith dialogue would be a *much* easier task if we could simply forget about the divinity of Christ. Some Christians dilute, or even deny, their creedal tradition and go down that route. But we shouldn't be

⁶ "Trinity" was a term invented by Tertullian (ca. 160–225).

⁷ 2 Cor 13:14. This letter is thought to been written in about 56CE. Other NT references that have Father, Son, and Spirit mentioned in close proximity are: 2 Cor 1:21-22; 1 Pet 1:2; Eph 4:4-6; Rev 1:4-5.

⁸ Matt 28:18-20. Matthew's Gospel is thought to been written in about 80-90CE. It matters not here whether Jesus *actually* said those words, Matthew's use of them reveals that their meaning was well understood by the community to whom he wrote. Note this trinitarian baptismal formula is also in the *Didache*, 7.1, and was possibly written before Matthew's Gospel.

⁹ i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. A more nuanced understanding takes these roles as *not* exclusive to each person, for the Trinity's "persons" are *not* in isolation from each other, but *indwell* each other. In Matt 28:18-20, the implied equivalency in status ("name"/authority) ensures the Spirit is also a "person."

¹⁰ See: 1 Cor 12:4-6.

¹¹ John 14:16-17; the implication here is that Jesus is the *first* advocate (1 John 2:1). See also: John 15:26; 16:7-11; 14:26.

See also: <https://securerusercontent.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Helper-Is-Coming.pdf> . It is nevertheless true that the divine spirit is *not* presented as a person in the Old Testament. The biblical writers' understanding of God is not fixed but *evolves* with time, as does theology itself.

¹² See also: Rom 8: 26,34; both Jesus and the Spirit are "interceding" on our behalf (but from different "locations.")

¹³ For example: John 10:30-36; 14:9-11. While this unity is very evident in John, it is implied in the other three gospels too; for example, consider the baptism of Jesus: Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-13; Luke 3:21-13, which also has trinitarian tones.

embarrassed about Christian “truth-claims,” not least because those of other faiths and worldviews are not shy about their own. My own view is that we are called to be *authentic* to our own beliefs while graciously dialoguing with those of other faiths and worldviews, with the view to better mutual understanding and to recognise where our values genuinely overlap, so that we can together enhance the broader society of which we are both a part. Too many Christians want to *weaponize* Jesus with reference to his divinity. The Jesus of the Gospels would decry such abuse.¹⁴ With that said, on this Trinity Sunday I want to now focus on the divinity of Christ.

Our reading today from Colossians is thought to be a very early hymn,¹⁵ similar to a *confession of faith*, and one that the writer cites because of its familiarity to his audience. The author - possibly Paul or, maybe, Timothy – is stressing a key theme in this letter, namely the *centrality* and *supremacy* of Jesus the Messiah. The hymn begins: “[Messiah Jesus] is the *image* of the *invisible* God.”¹⁶ Christians have often said that if you want to know what God is like, look *at* Jesus because *he* makes the invisible God visible. That’s the first reason why Jesus is *supreme*, because he’s *not* a copy in the *likeness* of God, but the *embodiment* of God in our world. In case we fail to get it the first time, the author repeats this claim *twice* more: “For in Christ *all the fullness* of the Deity lives in *bodily* form.”¹⁷ Moreover, the writer of the Book of Hebrews says the same thing: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the *exact representation* of his being.”¹⁸ Jesus is *not*, then, a demigod - half-divine, half-human. Jesus doesn’t have a human body together with the divine spirit or mind. He can only be properly understood as a human being who literally embodies, or incarnates, the fullness of the one true God.

The hymn continues: “Jesus is the firstborn over all creation.”¹⁹ The word “firstborn” is repeated in the second stanza and has created much controversy and debate in Church history.²⁰ By taking it *literally*, the Jehovah Witnesses, like the Arians of the 4th century, use this text to claim Jesus is *not* co-eternal with God. In other words, Jesus was *created* – like an archangel. But “firstborn” can also mean of *pre-eminent rank*,²¹ in this case *over all creation*, as the verse goes on to explain. Moreover, taking firstborn as literal contradicts what immediately follows: “for *all things* in heaven and on earth were created *in him* [that is, in Jesus]—*all things*, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers—*all things* were created *through him and for him*. He himself *is before all things*

¹⁴ See also 1 Pet 3:15, keeping in mind the last clause: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this *with gentleness and respect*.” [I preached on this on May 17 2020.]

¹⁵ Col 1:15-20, there is much that can be explored concerning a Greco-Roman appreciation of this poem in light of various philosophical worldviews at the time. Another example of an early liturgical hymn is Phil 2:6-11.

¹⁶ Col 1:15a. “He” refers to our “Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), or “Christ Jesus” (1:4), and later “beloved Son” (1:13). The metaphor of image (Greek *ikon*) implies a reflective mirror – polished metal surfaces in those days. It also reveals the inadequacy of Jesus as a “holy man” or a “good teacher.”

¹⁷ Col 2:9; 1:19; see also John 1:1-5,14.

¹⁸ Heb 1:3; see also 2 Cor 4:4.

¹⁹ Col 1:15, see also Col 1:18.

²⁰ The famous Arian controversy; see: Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 2nd edn, Penguin (1993), 133-151; Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, 3rd edn, Baker (2012), 39-57.

²¹ See Ps 89:27 with reference to King David.

and *all things* are held together *in him*.”²² The repeated stress on “all things” is evident; Jesus Christ being “firstborn” means that he is *supreme* and *not created*;²³ indeed, he is described as the *creator* and *goal* of all that is, and therefore, by implication, he’s *divine*! This is echoed in the opening of John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”²⁴ The 1st century writers saw no major inconsistency here with their Jewish tradition, but for sure they were adapting it!²⁵

In the second part of the hymn, it goes to say: “[Messiah Jesus] is the head of the body, the church,²⁶ as well as the beginning - the firstborn from the dead - so *that he himself may become first in all things*.”²⁷ The use of the words “head” and “firstborn” are again poetic, not literal, and again point to Christ’s supremacy. Jesus is not only the world’s creator; he is also the world’s redeemer. “Firstborn from the dead” simply means the resurrection and points to Jesus being undisputedly pre-eminent of the new creation as well as the old.

The hymn concludes by repeating its main confession of faith, followed by a succinct summary as to *why* this is important. It’s not a power claim to weaponize Jesus, rather it explains the *purpose* of Christ’s authority for the *benefit* of the whole world. “For God was pleased to have *all his fullness dwell* in the Son and *through him to reconcile all things to himself* by making peace through the blood of his cross—*through him*, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”²⁸

²² Col 1:16-17. Athanasius was quick to point that out: “But if all the creatures were created in him, he [Jesus] is *other* than the creatures, and he is *not* a creature, but the creator of the universe.”

²³ See also Heb 1:3 - “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining *all things* by his powerful word.” Indeed, see Heb 1:1-3:6 for Christ being superior to the angels too.

²⁴ John 1:1-3,14. The “in the beginning” echoes Gen 1:1. (See also [25].)

²⁵ See also 1 Cor 8:6. Here is added detail, if you are interested: The Hebrew *Shema* affirms the monotheism of Judaism: “Hear, O Israel; The LORD (YHWH) is our God (*Elohim*), the LORD alone (or ‘the LORD is one’),” Deut 6:4; (Note: Jesus recites the *Shema* in Mark 12:29.) The prophets repeatedly called the people to stop worshiping other gods and return to the one true God. As Isaiah states of the LORD: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god” (Isa 44:6b). The transcendence of the Creator God (YHWH) is evident in the Old Testament, but there are also strong indications of his immanence within creation in the various writers’ usage of “spirit,” “wisdom,” and “word.” The spirit of God (literally, “breath” or “wind”) is the power by which God animates creation (Gen 2:7) and anoints special people, such as prophets and the coming Messiah. The wisdom of God is more clearly personified in Proverbs 8–9 as “Lady Wisdom,” the one who helped YHWH create and structure the world. And the word/voice of God that we hear in Genesis 1 is powerful and effective; such speech-acts reflect that what God says will most definitely come to be. (Note: It is important to appreciate “the Word *became* flesh” (John 1:14) in this context.) The New Testament assumes this Old Testament conception of God, but its writers adapt their understanding of God in the light of the Christ-event. Consequently, for the Christian, there is one, true, Creator God, but this Creator God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together. Given, however, the earlier Old Testament usage of spirit, word, and wisdom as the means by which a transcendent God relates with the world, it is perhaps not such a huge step in thinking for the New Testament authors to link the person of Jesus the Messiah with God’s word and wisdom, and the person of the Holy Spirit with the divine spirit.

²⁶ Paul in Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 10:16–17; 12:12–27 uses the head/body image for a *local* church; here the writer uses it for the world-wide Church.

²⁷ Col 1:18.

²⁸ Col 1:19-20.

Jesus, God in the flesh, is *in* the redeeming or reconciling business, and that's good news for everybody. This tells us of *our* worth to God and that of the *whole* creation; "all things" are worth rescuing! Our rightful response is one of gratitude.²⁹ And we're reminded that rescue package came through the cross, through suffering love. Yes, the world is full of ugliness and evil, and we have seen a lot of that this last week in America. Yet creation is also full of beauty and a source of joy, and not just pain, bitterness, and suffering. Jesus, God in human form, came to experience and absorb all of that evil in himself and be the source of healing for our broken world. In him we will discover what true humanness means in practice. That's why we need to appreciate that we are *both* physical and spiritual beings - they are meant to be united as one and if we extract one from the other, we will never be able to address the complex social issues that we face. That's also why our faith is not a private or escapist spirituality cut off from the physical world around us. Rather our faith in Jesus is to show the whole world what it truly means to be human and what it truly means to be redeemed.

As I conclude, let me make two final observations.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity is *not*, then, a mere addition made by a bunch of men centuries after Jesus lived, as if it were some sort of fake-news conspiracy theory.³⁰ As you study the Gospels and letters, the writers, each in their different way, address the "*Who* is Jesus?" question. The doctrine of the Trinity *is* challenging. Nevertheless, I believe it is still a faithful summary and combination of *all* the New Testament texts concerning the *identity* of Jesus. You can't go to the New Testament and cut out the bits you don't like without becoming unorthodox.³¹ Remember, being baptised in the name of the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - *unites* all the Christian denominations along with a proclamation of our traditional Creeds.

Second, the writer of Colossians was quoting the hymn to make a point: belief in the supremacy of Jesus over all things *has consequences*. The author is asking his readers, "Do you understand what you are singing?" The supremacy of Jesus means he is the one who has a rightful and *unparalleled* claim on our lives and on this world. Consequently, the writer goes on to warn us: "Be careful *not* to allow anyone to captivate you through an empty, deceitful philosophy that is according to human traditions . . . and not according to Christ."³² Instead, he says, "Just as you received Christ Jesus as supreme Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and firm in your faith just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."³³ With the Spirit of truth's help, may we all continue steadfast in the faith. Amen.

²⁹ Col 2:6.

³⁰ The Holy Spirit has been given to the Church "to lead us into all truth" (John 16:13). This claim is *not* said in arrogance, but humility; nevertheless, we need to have faith that it is true – hence Col 2:8-12.

³¹ Consider the Marcion controversy.

³² Col 2:8. I omit "and the elemental spirits of the world" for simplicity.

³³ Col 2:6-7. The "supreme" is implied in the meaning of "Lord."