

After his resurrection Jesus was constituted “Lord of heaven and earth”. He uses his authority to bring together his disciples, still fearful and incredulous, and to send them out to the world with a task to accomplish - to make every inhabitant of the earth his disciple and so to transform the world into a “school of God.” If they do this, he will accompany them always. The presence of God is thus assured, provided the Church continues to preach the Gospel and to baptize in the name of the Triune God. It is as if to say, that Jesus will be present only among those who preach the Gospel.

Our celebration of the Most Holy Trinity reminds us that even today the Lord’s command still holds and we must obey. This is no time for fear or incredulity – there are still people waiting to be baptized, people who are not yet disciples of the Lord in a world that has not yet heard the good news. If we return to the mandate we have received, and fulfil the final will and testament of the Risen Lord, then we can be sure of his presence in our midst. The Lord is with those who accept his command, those who have him in their hearts and on their lips. For as long as there are people to hear the Gospel, we can count on the presence of Christ among us. God does not abandon those who do not cease to proclaim him. This is a great grace which becomes for us a way of life.

¹⁶ The eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. ¹⁷When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. ¹⁸ Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'

I. READ: UNDERSTAND WHAT THE TEXT SAYS, FOCUSING ON HOW IT SAYS IT

The account is a very precise, well structured composition. It begins and ends with a reference to the group of the apostles that went to Galilee where the Risen Jesus appeared to them (Mt 28,16-17). They received the promise that he would be with them always (Mt 28,20b). Jesus appeared with full authority and power (Mt 28,18), promised his continued presence with them (Mt 28,20b) and imposed on them a universal mission (Mt 28,19-20a).

The eleven were told of the resurrection (Mt 28,7-8.10), and they set out for Galilee, to a mountain that was already well known to them. They were not running away from Jerusalem, nor were they abandoning their daily affairs. They were following a precise indication that led them to the place where they would see the Lord (Mt 28,7.10). On seeing him they fell to the ground, adoring him, but some of them, surprisingly, hesitated – they still had doubts. The vision was not so striking as to eliminate all hesitation. The doubt diminishes their faith (cfr Mt 14,31) and in some way weakens the effect of the vision. To know that he is alive, it is not enough to see him. They must also obey him.

The two different reactions of the witnesses reflect two positions with regard to the resurrection that were to be found in the early Christian community. By drawing attention to the fact that the experience of a personal meeting with the Risen Lord does not lead to faith without doubt, Matthew wants to show that it is not the vision that is important but the mission to the world (Mt 28,19). The central message of the paschal experience is not Jesus' new way of being, his life after death, but his promise to be with the disciples always (Mt 28,20). Certainly the empty tomb and the various appearances were central to the paschal experience, but the writer sees them already as events of the past. What is important now is obedience to the Risen Lord. Their doubts will be overcome through their mission to the world, because the mission, and it alone, is what gives the assurance of the presence of the Risen Lord. Anyone who goes to the ends of the earth will feel accompanied by the Lord, and will have no doubts about the resurrection. In this way, Matthew prepared the way for subsequent generations of Christians. The further in time they are from the events of Easter, the more they will have to focus their attention on the task they have been given and to face the problems of their day. With faith still not free from doubts, the Eleven finally succeed in seeing him (Mt 28,17). He appears to them as universal sovereign and imposes his will on them (Mt 28,18-20). The Risen Lord exercises his power by sending his witnesses to the world. Making people disciples of Christ is the way to make them sharers in his personal victory and to assure them of his unfailing presence. For as long as the community is a school of discipleship, Christ will be at home there. Wherever people become his followers, the Lord will be present. The mission, therefore, cannot be reduced simply to indoctrination or a mere apprenticeship in the teachings of Jesus. It is to introduce pagans to a new way of life in following Jesus.

Baptism in the name of the Triune God and teaching people to follow Jesus are the two basic activities of this educative work among our brothers and sisters. The final promise is not simply a repetition of earlier promises. The Risen Lord now pledges himself by his word, and by his almighty power, to stay with his followers always, not only while they follow him (Mt 10,19-20) or when they come together to pray (Mt 18,20) but as long as they are where He wants them to be, among the peoples of the earth, with the gospel as their sole occupation. The world will end before his presence comes to an end. His presence is permanent and efficacious. Jesus will be God-with-us (Mt 1,23), if his witnesses stay with the peoples of the world (Mt 28,20).

II. MEDITATE: APPLY WHAT THE TEXT SAYS TO LIFE

At the end of the Easter season during which we have recalled the principal facts of our salvation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, his ascension into heaven and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the Church wants us to concentrate our attention on God who is the source of such great grace, and to adore the mystery of such great love. Anyone who believes in Jesus as Saviour, must also believe in the divine Trinity. Today we celebrate the central mystery of our faith: the God of Jesus, the one true God is Father who created us and called us into being; Son who died for us, is risen from the dead and now lives for us; and Spirit who accompanies us during the absence of Jesus, and who desires what is best for us, our sanctification.

This mystery, like all the other mysteries of our existence, cannot be grasped by our intelligence. Like so many other mysteries, it can be understood only in the heart. We will never be able to explain how it is possible that one God should be three persons, just as we will never be able to explain why God loves us so much. God loves us so much that it was not enough for him to be One - he wanted to triplicate himself for us. This mysterious decision helps us to understand those who are frightened

by such great unmerited love. As St Augustine said, when we speak of three persons in God, we do not define God better, but we cannot remain completely silent. Faced with love, the only possible reactions are acceptance or refusal. To try to fathom the reasons why we are loved is to begin to lose the love we have discovered. We do not analyse or dissect something that we value, but the more we value something, the more we contemplate it. Instead of looking for a rational explanation of the love that God has for us, we should contemplate that love and accept it silently and gratuitously. We have a God who has made himself three to show us his love, to come closer to us in a manner that is both convincing and undeniable. Who could ever have imagined it?

God loved us so much that he has saved us by calling us again to life. He loved us so much that he wanted to be like us, living among us as true man, one of us, sharing suffering and death like us. He loved us so much that he gave us the spirit, not of servants but of sons and daughters. Out of love, which is incomprehensible because it is love without measure, our one God is three persons who love us. We cannot live to understand this triple love of God for us but we can live to feel ourselves embraced by the personal love of the Triune God. God must always remain incomprehensible, but a God who triplicates himself to love us more is a God we can adore. We who believe in a God like this should discover again the joy of living, the confidence in ourselves and the security of knowing that we will not be let down in the future. As believers in the Triune God, we know that we are children of a God who became three in order to love us more and to love us forever, in different ways. What more could God have done for us? "Ask of ancient times that went before us, from the day that God created man and placed him on the earth, was there ever in all this world, from one extreme of the heavens to the other, news as great as this? Has such a thing ever been heard of? Acknowledge therefore today, and meditate on it in your heart, that there is no other Lord like our God in heaven above or on earth beneath."

Even with all this, we have to acknowledge that our faith in the Trinity does not free us from the difficulties of life nor does it bestow any special privileges on us. Every one of us can find reason to complain at times of the insecurity in which we live, the illness we suffer or dread, the evil we know, the injustices we have suffered or, worse still, those we have caused. Like everyone else we believers face each day with distrust and diffidence. It is hard for us to experience the nearness of God. We believe that God has left us, that he has abandoned us. But how can this be if we believe that we can count on a God who, to put it briefly and - in what may be considered an unusual way of saying it - exists in three different forms, three distinct persons, totally on our side and always in our favour?

Without doubt our inability to appreciate the nearness of the Triune God to us comes from the irresponsibility with which we live our faith. The Risen Jesus promised to stay with all those whom he ordered to go out to the world and make new disciples. When we present ourselves, therefore, as people sent by Jesus without any embarrassment or inferiority complex, and when we are not satisfied just with living the faith ourselves, when we teach what Jesus taught us, when we rediscover our pride in being his disciples and are prepared to say so publicly, then we will feel close to the one God who willed to be in three persons, in order to love us in three different ways. Christ gave us his word - he made a public declaration before leaving this earth - pledging himself to stay with those who preach the gospel and teach his word.

Only those who devote themselves to making community among people, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, can hope to be with God who is a community of

persons. The stipend we receive in return for our commitment to build a community of disciples among people, the salary we get for creating spaces in the world where people live by the teachings of Christ, our reward for living our faith in common within the Church, is always God, the awareness of his nearness, the certainty of his companionship, the experience of his triple love. There is no other way to rediscover God, and to regain the joy of being faithful to him in the world, than by accepting the mission he has left us. It does not make sense for us to feel we have been abandoned by God, if we are the ones who have abandoned his will.

To live without God, when we have access to three divine persons, is sad but also senseless. If we return to our task, God will remain with us forever! We Christians are loved and cared for by a God who is Father, Son and Spirit, so that we may dedicate ourselves to loving others. Only those who go out to others as disciples can be sure of meeting God. Anyone who does not distance himself from his neighbour will always be close to God. Believing in God means, therefore, defending life which is so dear to God, and defending his creation. It means living the fraternity that is born from his death on the cross, struggling against every injustice, wherever we see it and even where it is not seen, helping and encouraging those who cannot find a reason to live, and if necessary, even giving our life so that they may find our God. We have no right to privatize God who willed to be a community of persons in order to love us more and better, and we have to say this to the world to which we have been sent. When we proclaim him we receive God's love three times over. The reward is far greater than we could ever have dreamt of. God loves us as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, in whom he dwells, if we go out to the world to recall what we already know and what we are already living, namely, that He is Father, Son and Spirit.

[Fr. Michael Smyth, translator]