

May 22, 2016
Holy Trinity Sunday
John 16:12-15

[Jesus said to his disciples:] 12 "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. 13 But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. 15 Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you.



Ceiling Fresco in the Russian Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity, Jerusalem, Israel,

Background

The early disciples did not have the advantage of reflecting on the nature of Jesus' relationship to God and how the Holy Spirit fit into that relationship. The need to understand the Holy Spirit arises with Jesus' departure and return to God. Important to the Church's understanding of the Holy Spirit are the five statements about the Paraclete found in John's gospel.

- "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you." (John 14:16-17)
- "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name--he will teach everything and remind you of all that [I] told you." (John 14:26)
- "When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning." (John 15:26-27)
- "But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes he will convict the world in regard to sin and righteousness and condemnation: sin, because they do not believe in me; righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see me; condemnation, because the ruler of this world has been condemned." (John 16:7-11)
- The last is John 16:12-15, the gospel text for today, Trinity Sunday.

These passages describe the Holy Spirit as the presence of God that will reassure a community that is struggling with all the questions that face them, now that Jesus is no longer in their midst. As part of this struggle, the early disciples had to deal with a culture that valued honor more than truthfulness. There are a number of incidents recorded in the gospels that reflect this mindset.

For example, after Jesus dismisses the woman caught in adultery, (John 8:1-11) Jesus enters a long discussion with the Pharisees about the validity of this action. (John 8:12-59) After much debate Jesus finally says to them: "Whoever belongs to God hears the word of God; for this reason you do not listen, because you do not belong to God." (John 8:47) In order to deflect Jesus' accusation, they indirectly say something they know to be false: "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed?" (John 8:48) They know that Jesus is not a Samaritan, and that he is not possessed. But they are not interested in truthfulness. Instead they are avoiding Jesus' accusation and trying to maintain some degree of honor. Another familiar example is Peter's denial of his relationship to Jesus outside of the house of Annas, the High Priest. (John 18:25-27) In this culture it was better for Peter to preserve his honor, even for a short time, than to tell the truth. Therefore he tells those who suggest that he, Peter, is a follower of Jesus that he does not even know the man.

Peter is able to maintain some degree of honor even if it is at the cost of being truthful about his relationship to Jesus. As a value, this is very different from western culture, but it may not be so different from western practice. The gospel text here highlights one of the important qualities for the early Christians who live immersed in a culture where honor is more important than truth. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. The Holy Spirit guides them to all truth. The Holy Spirit doesn't present his own truth, he presents the truth that he has taken from the Son--and he presents it to them (and us).

Reflection Questions

1. When you read newspapers or listen to news reports, do you presume that what you are being told is accurate?
2. After presidential debates, those who analyze what each candidate said often include some assessment of the accuracy of the statements made by each of the candidates. Do you find this analysis helpful? What does it say about our need for truthfulness?
3. At the beginning of our text, Jesus says "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now." Why would Jesus make that statement? How would you feel if a person who had become a significant mentor for you was leaving, and they said to you something like what Jesus has said to the disciples here?
4. The spirit will (1) guide the disciples to all truth, (2) declare the things that are coming, and (3) glorify Jesus by telling them about him. How do you experience God working in these ways in your life? Do you make the connection that this is the way the Holy Spirit is present in your life, in the life of your community, and in the Church?
5. When you pray, do you notice that some of your prayers seem to be addressed to God as Father, others to the Son, and still others to the Spirit?
6. Why do you think the Church celebrates Trinity Sunday every year?

The reflection and questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM.
They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.

