

# The Church and the Trinity III: The Church of the Father

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*Terminating the trilogy which we have published to commemorate  
Geoffrey Preston*

In the Johannine letters we learn that 'Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3b). In a second Johannine idiom, we 'abide in' the Father and he 'abides' (or 'indwells', 'remains' or 'makes his home') in us.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen, it was in the Spirit that we were baptised into the *koinōnia* of the Son: yet the origin and goal of the process is neither Son nor Spirit but the Father himself. We have fellowship with the Father because 'God's seed abides in whomever is begotten of God'. That is, we have fellowship with the Father precisely *as* Father, to the degree that we are made one New Man with the Son, conformed to the Son's image, being members of the Son's body. We stand where the Son stands, and have that same filial relationship with the Father which the Son himself enjoys. We form one body with the Son, living by the same Spirit or vital principle as he, and living before the same Father, the ultimate mystery of existence. This mystery, the Ground of being and the granite of it, we learn to perceive as personal and to address as 'Father'. The disciples of Jesus once asked him to teach them to pray as he does; in response they receive the *Pater Noster*. The Lord's Prayer is the prayer of those who stand where Jesus stands. It is the sign of the *koinōnia* with the Father of those who have been baptised in one Spirit into one body. This is why traditionally people say the Our Father for the first time as Christians immediately after they have been initiated into Christ by baptism and confirmation. The Lord's Prayer is the setting in which the revelation of the mystery of God as Father is first experienced.

The New Testament often speaks of God as Father, although in the Old Testament this is a rare designation for him and an unknown form of address. In the Synoptic Gospels we hear the expression 'the Father' twice only and both times on the lips of Jesus. The German exegete Ernst Lohmeyer suggested we may infer from this that the expression 'the Father' was understood to be not a name for God but a way of speaking to him.<sup>2</sup> In Matthew and Luke Jesus addresses God five times as 'Father'

or 'my Father': there can be little doubt that this was a distinctive mode of address of Jesus for God, and that he encouraged his disciples to speak in the same way. Straight away, we hear of this God as the Father who is 'in heaven' (Matthew 6:9). This addendum may give us a moment's pause. What precisely is contributed by the phrase referring to 'heaven'? Heaven, we can say, is the creation as inconceivable to man, just as earth is the creation he can conceive. But heaven, the things invisible and inconceivable, is not God. To use the language of Scripture, we might say that heaven is the 'throne' of God; but strictly speaking, we have no right to deify the reality we cannot conceive any more than that we can. Heaven, as where God is, witnesses to the infinite distance between the Creator God and his creatures. When Jesus tells his disciples to speak to him who is in heaven, he is pointing them away from the God who dwells in Zion, or the God who makes his voice heard on Sinai, or the God about whose mountain (Jerusalem or Gerizim?) there was such fierce debate between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus points people away from any limitation on the nature of God by any particular place or any particular tradition. The God who is in heaven, but is not heaven, is the God who is altogether inconceivable and yet not thereby God. He is not simply what we cannot conceive, but he is the Creator and Lord of what we cannot conceive. 'Heaven' breaks down any attempt to confine God. But, says Jesus, this God who is in heaven is to be addressed as 'Father', a mode of address which makes this God who is infinitely distant and mysterious and altogether at the same time very near.

Speaking of God as Father, and even speaking to him in some form of address which included the name 'Father', was not altogether unknown outside of Christianity. Homer talks in *The Odyssey* (1:28) about 'the Father of men and gods', 'Father Zeus, who rules over the gods and mortal men'. But it would seem that this conception of fatherhood always involves that of lordship, not just as a correlative but as the dominant idea in what it means to be a father. As Aristotle says:

The rule of a father over his children is like that of a king over his subjects. The male parent is in a position of authority both in virtue of the affection to which he is entitled and by right of his seniority, and his position is thus in the nature of royal authority. So Homer was right and proper in using the invocation 'Father of gods and men' to address Zeus, who is king of them all. (*Politics* I:xii)

In other words, when in ancient Greece people spoke of Zeus as 'father' they had in mind principally his lordship, the relationship of power and authority towards obedience and submission. In the Old Testament God is called Father of Israel, and Israel is called the first-born son of God. God is 'the Father of Israel, who created him, who made him and established him' (Deuteronomy 32:6). But here too the Fatherhood of

God is inseparable from his lordship, and in speaking of God in this way the intention is always to refer to his right of dominion as father over his sons, or over his Son, Israel. As a synagogue prayer repeats time and again, 'Our Father, our King'. There is, however, one exceptionally interesting text which suggests that in not calling God 'Father' the people have thwarted his plan for relationship with them.

I said, How gladly would I treat you as a son,  
giving you a pleasant land, a patrimony fairer than  
that of any nation. I said, you shall call me 'my Father',  
and never cease to follow me. But like a woman  
who is unfaithful to her lover, so you, Israel, were unfaithful  
to me. Come back to me, wayward sons!

(Jeremiah 3:19—20; 22a)

In contrast, the word 'Father' appears as the central term in Christian praying from the very beginnings. To cry out '*Abba*, Father' is said by Paul to be the way in which the Holy Spirit prays in those who are Christ's.

As many as are led by the Spirit of God,  
these are sons of God. For you did not  
receive the spirit of bondage again unto fear,  
but you received the Spirit of adoption,  
by which we cry *Abba*, Father. The Spirit  
himself bears witness with our Spirit that  
we are children of God, and if children, then  
heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.

(Romans 8: 14—17a)

The New Testament certainly regards this ability to call on God as Father as based on the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth and on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It thinks of it as distinctive of Christians, because distinctive of Christ. God is revealed as Father because Jesus is revealed as Son. Because the Son has been revealed, and admits disciples into his relationship with God, so they too can have fellowship with the Father. *Koinōnia* with the Father is only possible on the basis of the human life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Son of God.

This communion was historically realised in those incidents which must be acknowledged as incontrovertibly true of the life of Jesus, incidents which the Gospels understand as the irruption of the reign of God into history. For example, there would be the meals which Jesus took with crooks and whores, meals in which he welcomed them with a welcome they experienced as the welcome of God. Then there were the miracles, the works of recreation of humanity, wherein the natural world is submitted to man once again. Or again, there were the parables of the Kingdom, in which in the words of Jesus the word of God comes to expression as promise and threat, offering and judgment. In all his life

and work, in fact, Jesus speaks for God. He does so in such a way that men may stand with him before the face of God as God's own children. For Jesus as the only-begotten Son is already in *koinōnia* with the Father: he is in the Father and the Father is in him. In Jesus God and man are reconciled and share a common life. Jesus is God turned towards man and man turned towards God. If we are in the Son, then we are in the One whom the Son reveals.

This *koinōnia* with the Father is something which has to be lived, and expressed in our behaviour; for it may be lost unless it becomes the subject of a reiterated option. Just as *koinōnia* with the Spirit and the Son have their modes of visibility, so does *koinōnia* with the Father.

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have no fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

(1 John 1:5a—7)

An evil way of life, the kind of life that prevents communion and openness with other people, is a sign that a person does not enjoy *koinōnia* with the Father. This is not to say that man must be morally blameless if he is to have such fellowship with the Father, but simply that he must want to have that fellowship. He will find it through perseverance in the fellowship of the body of Christ, the body of the accepted sacrifice. Faith in the sense of intellectual assent to God in the way he has revealed himself is necessary, but it is not sufficient. We must also abide in the teaching of Christ, walking as he walked in the life of *agapē*.

He who says, 'I know him', and does not keep his commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him. This is how we know that we are in him: he who says that he abides in him ought himself also to walk as he walked.

(1 John 2:4; 5b—6)

Such agapeistic, loving fellowship is already eternal life:

We know we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren. (3.14)

Such a loving life-style expresses and advances the reign of God in the world: it demonstrates its power and increases its area of influence.

So the *koinōnia* we have with the Father is not merely a matter of standing before the Father with the Son. It also entails acting and speaking *in persona Christi* in the Father's name. There can be no fellowship with the Father unless there is an active realisation of what it is to be a son in communion with the Father. As the First Letter of St

John puts it:

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that when he shall be manifested we shall be like him, for we shall see him even as he is. And everyone who has this hope set on him purifies himself even as he is pure. (3:2—3)

For the ultimate goal of Christian ethics is nothing less than this: seeing God as he is. Not that our fellowship with the Father will one day be all, and our fellowship with the Son and Spirit cease. The *koinōnia* is always trinitarian, as God is always trinitarian. Indeed, the experience of the threefold form of the *koinōnia* with God in the Christian fellowship underlies all the dogmatic endeavours which issued in the Catholic understanding of the Trinity. Like so many of the teachings of the Church, that dogma is not meant to be the solution of a problem, but rather a stating of the problem in all its starkness.

It is not to be expected that in the end there will be no mystery about the innermost being of God. Even in his revelation in the Son through the Holy Spirit, the Father remains hidden. He may be spoken to as Father and spoken for as Father by the Son and by those who in the Son are themselves sons, but he does not become unconcealed. The life we live with Christ in God is a life hidden with Christ in God: it cannot be traced to that ultimate source where God remains the God who hides himself, though in truth he is the God of Israel, the Saviour. What is required of us is obedience and acceptance of the sonship God chose to give us through the incarnation, death and resurrection of the eternal Son. Our sonship in the Son is founded on the reality of God's eternal Fatherhood, yet that fatherhood remains ever beyond us, the source of the divine nature of which he has made us partakers.

Perhaps here we stand most in need, not so much of words as of images and icons, verbal or plastic representations that contain what they represent, and give the grace of which they speak. In the New Testament we are offered many verbal icons of the Church, many ways of representing the Son who speaks for and to the Father. We can finish by looking at an image in the ordinary sense of that word. We may look at an actual icon of the ultimate mystery of the Church. Possibly the greatest of all icons is Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity, painted in 1425 and some fifty years later declared by the Council of the Hundred Chapters to be the model for all iconography and for all representations of the Trinity. The icon moves simultaneously on three planes. First, there is the visit of the three angels to Abraham at midday by the oaks of Mamre, those three angels whom the whole patristic and liturgical tradition has seen as a manifestation of the Trinity. Second comes the plane of the economy of our redemption. The three angels make up the

divine Council to form the plan of salvation: between them on the table lies the eucharistic Cup enclosing the Lamb of the redemptive sacrifice. The third and final plane is merely suggested: it is transcendent and inaccessible, the mystery which remains always and ultimately a mystery, yet into which we can enter by faith, by contemplation, by activity.

In being baptised we find ourselves already within this icon. The icon does not possess the kind of Renaissance perspective in which lines converge outside the picture. It is closer to Cubism, where the onlooker looks from within at what is there to be seen. The three angels are in repose, in the supreme peace of What is in Itself. Yet they also go out of one another in such a way that the icon has a circular movement which takes off from the central angel and finally returns to him. Each angel might be taken for the other: their difference lies simply in the personal attitude of each to the others. As this might have been expressed in Western theology (for instance by St Thomas), the persons of the Trinity *are* their relationships. It is in being relationships that they are other than the other persons. The world, represented by the rectangle of the table, is included in this circle of love that comes forth from the central figure and returns to him. This central angel is the Father, and his posture is one of pure activity wholly accomplished. But the inclination of the neck and head, and the outward-going folds of his cloak express the dynamism that takes him to the Son. In this synthesis of movement and immobility lies the ineffable mystery of the Godhead. Ineffable—and yet expressed, spoken, revealed in the convex curving lines which the Son answers by the receptivity of his own concave lines, and the obedience, attention and abnegation these imply. The Father is in in him, and what the Father had is his. The angel on the right, the Holy Spirit, occupies the region between the Father and the Son through the inclination and tendency of his whole being. He realises the communion between them, he is their *koinōnia*.

The Son is the revelation of the Father, as the artist's colours make clear. The Spirit is the Spirit who fills and renews the earth and makes it green again. In this circular movement of the icon all nature is taken up: the rocks to the right, and a building to the left, the rocks of nature and the building of Christ's Church. But at the back of it all, the source of the movement and the colour is the Father, inaccessible in the density of his colours, in the darkness of his light, yet revealed in a gentler and more accessible form in the brightness of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The hand of the Father blessed the Cup which contains the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, the eucharistic Chalice with its promise that we will one day drink the fruit of the vine new in the Kingdom of the Father.

Paul Evdokimov wrote:

From this icon comes a powerful appeal: Be one as I and the Father are one. Man is made to the image of the trinitarian God; the church-communion is written into his nature as its

ultimate truth. All men are called to united themselves again around the one same Cup, to life themselves up to the level of the heart of god and to take part in the messianic banquet, to become one single Temple, one single Lamb. 'By life eternal (the Spirit) they will know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. The vision ends on this eschatological note: it is an anticipation of the Kingdom of heaven bathed in a light which is not of this world, bathed in a pure, disinterested, divine joy, just because the Trinity exists and we are loved and all is grace. The soul is filled with wonder and falls quiet. Mystics never speak about the heights: only silence finds them.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 See R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I* (New York 1966), pp. 510—512.
- 2 E. Lohmeyer, *The Lord's Prayer* (ET London 1965).
- 3 P. Evdokimov, *L'Art de l'Icone. Théologie de la beauté* (Paris 1970), p. 216.

## To Geoffrey Preston OP

Alan Wall

*Written on his death in 1977.*

St. Thomas was your favourite  
A fat man overwhelmed with charity  
Mind loaded with improbable distinctions.  
I was sceptical about those angels  
But you assured me that they posed no problem  
Calling the Visitation 'understandable'.  
I smiled intently, baffled.  
I'd like to think you're better placed  
To clarify these issues—we always  
Avoided speculations on such things.  
Goblins and ghosts you were sure  
Provided an escape clause for the faithless.  
You told me: 'Nothing of real value  
Is misplaced by God.' I'll hang on to  
That then, nothing unredeemed  
Except a thousand quiet comments  
For a thousand grimy situations  
Sadder without you. Except (for me)  
Some vague and future time together  
Maybe working on the question of those angels ...