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Unlike anyone else

by Roger Karban

Scripture for Life

Since the Council of Nicaea's definition of the Trinity in 325 -- three persons in one God -- isn't spelled out as such in Scripture, it's challenging to give a biblical homily on this day. Perhaps we should begin with the commandment: "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or worship them" (Deuteronomy 5:8).



Though we've traditionally applied this prohibition only to carving idols of strange gods, the ancient Israelites also applied it to creating images of Yahweh. Except for one or two debatable discoveries, we've yet to unearth a statue, carving, bas-relief or any other representation of Yahweh.

Proverbs 8:22-31
Though we Christians contend we faithfully keep the Ten Commandments, we have no problem, for instance, with Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling with its classic "old-man God" imagery.

Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15
There's a good reason for prohibiting Yahweh images. Our sacred authors constantly refer to Yahweh as

‘holy.’ The Hebrew word for holy, *kadosh*, means ‘other’: unlike anything or anyone else we’ve known. How can one depict or define a person or thing that is completely holy?

Those who attempt to create an image of Yahweh will automatically be limiting God to human concepts. How tall is Yahweh, what gender, what color?

Christians have a parallel problem depicting the risen Jesus. Paul tells us the risen Jesus, as God, is quite different from the historical Jesus. The historical Jesus was limited to the age, culture and gender in which he ministered. He was a free Jewish man. The risen Jesus is a ‘new creation,’ neither slave or free, Jew or Gentile, man or woman. He/she’s totally other.

In 2000, NCR held a contest inviting people to submit an up-to-date picture of Jesus. The winning artist, Janet McKenzie, gave us a portrait in which no one could be certain of Jesus’ gender, race or nationality. Quite biblical.

The bishops at Nicaea were given an impossible task. Fr. Bernard Lonergan always reminded his students, ‘They had to show Father, Son and Holy Spirit were all made of the same ‘stuff.’ ‘Just what is that stuff?’ Lonergan made it clear that even when the bishops came up with their ‘three persons in one God’ statement, they defined the word *person* as it had never been defined before. They were forced to break through the limits their Greek language and Greek concepts naturally imposed on them.

That’s where today’s readings kick in.

Our Proverbs author is instructing his readers about wisdom -- God’s personality embedded in all creation. If nature has patterns, then God has patterns. Though convinced those who study nature can learn a lot about Yahweh’s behavior, the writer can only speak about wisdom in poetic terms.

Even Paul is limited when he speaks about our call to be other Christs. Dying and rising must be part of our personality. Yet right here and now we don’t physically die and rise as this itinerant Galilean preacher once did. We’re one with him/her in symbolic ways. Realizing he was physically crucified because of the all-inclusive message he preached, we best imitate him by constantly working at becoming one with others. That kind of justice and peace only happens when we die to ourselves.

That’s where the Holy Spirit comes into the picture. Jesus’ Spirit both ‘pours the love of God’ into our hearts and shows us how to share that love with others. The peace Jesus offers only happens when we join him in giving ourselves to all around us.

The author of John’s Gospel has had at least 60 years to reflect on the implications of Jesus’ dying and rising. He knows how the church has evolved over those years. That’s why his Jesus makes an amazing promise during his Last Supper farewell address, ‘I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. 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.’

John’s convinced that revelation isn’t just a one-time event. The risen Jesus, through the Spirit, constantly leads us to new insights, new ways of seeing and understanding God in our everyday lives. Applied to today’s feast, the evangelist is telling us one definition of God doesn’t fit all. If we believe our God is the holiest entity we’ll ever encounter, then we’ll always be encountering that God in different ways.

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