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Preaching Feasts of Ideas: Fresh Thinking for Familiar Seasons

Because Lent begins so late in 2000, the May issue of *New Theology Review* does not arrive, as usual, on the cusp of Ordinary Time. Rather, it comes to you early in the Easter Season. This delayed calendar provides a welcomed opportunity to focus this column on the Easter season and that doublet of feasts which serve as the transition after Easter back into Ordinary Time. Although it may seem a little backwards, it could even be useful to begin this reflection with a consideration of this small festal cluster at the end of the Easter season. This might enable us not only to ponder how to preach these precious feasts but, even more importantly, to consider how they help us to think afresh about preaching through Easter and through the whole of the liturgical year.

Before Ordinary Time resumes with the Thirteenth Sunday of the Year [July 2], the Church will celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity [June 18], and the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ [June 25]. These two solemnities—coming right on the heels of Easter, its six Sundays, Ascension and Pentecost—could prove daunting if not overwhelming for preachers who may feel they have nothing left to say at the end of the liturgically exhausting fifty days. Reflecting upon the unique nature of these feasts, however, could both inspire our preaching for those feasts and maybe even allow for a broader reconceptualizing of our preaching.

The Feasts of the Trinity and the Body and Blood of Christ are sometimes called feasts of “ideas.” Adolf Adam provides a useful introduction to this genre of feasts. He writes:

These do not focus on particular events of salvation but have as their object truths of faith, special aspects of Christian teaching and piety or various titles of the Lord, his mother or a saint. Idea-feasts are also called devotional feasts or dogmatic, thematic and stasis feasts (in contrast to the “dynamic” feasts which have the redemptive actions of Christ for their object). Among the idea feasts are, e.g., the feasts of the Trinity, Corpus Christi, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Christ the King, the Precious Blood, the Holy Name, the Holy Family and feasts of Mary (Adam, 25).

Adam's characterization of feasts of ideas as "static" rather than "dynamic" might sound a little off-putting—for who wants to devote energy to preaching a "static feast"? On the other hand, he does get to the heart of the matter by emphasizing the dogmatic- and faith-centered nature of such feasts. This characteristic of feasts of ideas is highlighted when we recognize that such feasts are not directly related to any past *event* in salvation history (such as the Ascension) nor historically identified with any past *event* in the life of the Church (such as the death of a martyr or the dedication of a church).

This is not to deny that such feasts have an historical origin in the Church. The preacher needs to distinguish, however, between the development of a feast and the mystery that such a feast is celebrating. This point is illustrated by a brief consideration of the Feast of the Trinity. The trinitarian interplay of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit did not have its origins in human history. Christians believe that this Trinity of love existed before the dawn of human history and will continue in impassioned self-giving when human history is only a divine memory. Yet, while the Trinity has existed for all time, the Christian community did not always have language to express this mystery. Actually it was not until the writings of the North African theologian Tertullian (died c. 225) that the language of "Trinity" appears to have entered Christian discourse.

The centuries following Tertullian saw many dogmatic controversies within the Christian community. The First Council of Constantinople (381) and then the Council of Chalcedon (451) provided and then affirmed a belief in the Trinity which has become the center of orthodox faith: God is one substance in three distinct persons. While there were immediate liturgical ramifications for this belief, these were not first manifested in the calendar of the church year. Rather, this developing dogma of the Trinity had its first and immediate impact on Christian prayer formulas. In particular, what was until then the "traditional" doxology ("Glory be *to* the Father, *through* the Son, *in* the Holy Spirit"), which could be used to argue against the equality of the three persons of the Trinity, was replaced by what St. Basil and others considered a more orthodox form ("Glory be *to* the Father, *with* the Son *and* the Holy Spirit"). Today we inherit this doctrinal development every time we use our form of the doxology ("Glory be *to* the Father, *and to* the Son, *and to* the Holy Spirit).

Apart from this doxological change, liturgical devotion to the Trinity developed slowly. A preface to the Trinity does appear around the middle of the eighth century, and in the next century a votive Mass of the Trinity emerges. In some Benedictine monasteries a Feast of the Trinity on the Sunday after Pentecost could have been celebrated before the year 1000. This feast, however, was opposed for a very long

time by Rome. One pope, for example, is reported to have said that no special day should be devoted to a feast of the Trinity because that mystery is celebrated daily by the Church. Eventually, however, the popularity of the feast could not be denied, and John XXII approved it for the universal Church in 1334.

Similar histories could be told of feasts of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Sacred Heart and the other feasts of ideas which populate the calendar. The great contribution of such feasts to our praying and preaching is that while these feasts *have* a history, they are not essentially *about* history. Thus, the Feast of the Trinity reminds us that every moment in the liturgical year is not about the past, but about now. This is clear when we immerse ourselves in the readings for the Feast of the Trinity.

The present tense proclamation from Deuteronomy 4, for example, asserts "This is why you must now know and fix in your heart that the Lord is God." Yes, there were revelations of God in the past; yes, there were signs and wonders which God had performed before. The gist of the Word, however, is not about *then* but about *now*; the true covenant moment is not when the commandments and statutes were first given, but the present community's embrace of those commandments and statutes. Similarly, the Matthean announcement (Matt 28:19) to make disciples of all nations through baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not the invocation of a memory about the early Church's mission. Rather, Matthew is for us a present-tense proclamation of the Church's mission today, and the daily reckoning with our own baptismal call to discipleship.

If preachers can grapple credibly with the non-historical heart of feasts of ideas, and engage the community with the ever-present reality that undergirds a feast like that of the Trinity, then we will have acquired an important prism for preaching the whole of the Easter mystery and the liturgical year. Sometimes there is a tendency among us—especially in seasons such as Triduum, Easter or Christmas which relate key moments in salvation history—to preach them as though they were a kind of liturgical memoir or salvation-history timeline. So Holy Thursday becomes the day we recall the Last Supper, Good Friday a kind of annual funeral for Jesus after his execution, Holy Saturday a day in waiting, and Easter Sunday the annual celebration recalling the grateful resolution of this "holy tragedy" in resurrection.

What feasts of ideas like that of the Trinity teach us, however, is that the essence of *every* feast is not then, not past, not history and not simple recollection. Rather, every feast, Sunday, Eucharist and liturgy of the church year is about now: about God's selfless proffering of salvation to us in the present moment. Thus, every feast, Sunday, Eucharist and liturgy are summons to reckoning with a relentless God whose

almost stubborn pursuit of human response invades our consciousness only occasionally.

Confronting a feast like that of the Trinity might bring us to admit that, in truth, every feast, every Sunday, every season of the church year is ultimately one of "ideas." This is not to suggest that our preaching should be "heady" or somehow idealized. Never! On the contrary, admitting the validity of "feasts of ideas" for every preaching moment inevitably lodges us in the self-convicting present. God is not about the past; God doesn't even have a past. There is only the eternal present, where the Trinity is, as it ever shall be, in an eternal dance of pouring out and filling up, begetting and embracing, loving beyond all measure. What an idea! What a feast!

REFERENCES

Adam, Adolf. *The Liturgical Year*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981.

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