

Hymn to the Trinity

Jesus is risen, Heaven is dawning
Jesus revealing the Father's love
Come, Holy Spirit, show us the Father
Show us our place in the life of the Son

Joy and anguish, Divine and human
Heaven and all things joined in one Man
Jesus has brought us home to the Father
Give Him the glory for our new life

Praise to the Father, Jesus, and Spirit
Praise to the Three who love life as One
Father in Jesus, Jesus in Father
Spirit in their love, one God in Three

The structure and content of this hymn are meant to reflect the Triune nature of God and the progression of the Trinity's encounter with humanity, so, for example, the hymn has three verses as God has three persons.

The first verse begins with Jesus' resurrection and the revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven. ("Jesus is risen/Heaven is dawning.") Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom, his resurrection, and his revelation of the Father's love are the starting points of God's revelation to humanity of his Triune Life. Humanity, as represented by Israel, prior to Jesus' preaching and his resurrection was only dimly aware of the distinction within the one God who had revealed himself to them. Jesus reveals himself to Israel as the Father's Son, anointed in the Holy Spirit, (Mark 1:10-11) and in doing so he reveals the Trinity. He speaks of the Father's love (Luke 11:13). He declares the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of heaven (Mark 1:15) – its "dawning" in the words of this hymn. Jesus' resurrection is the affirmation that he really is the Son of the Father, that his revelation of the Kingdom of heaven is true, and that the Father really does love us as Jesus says. So the first two lines of the hymn declare that Jesus' resurrection is the confirmation that Heaven is dawning and that the Father really does love us. ("Jesus revealing/The Father's love.")

In the story of the gospel, as in each individual life, this revelation creates a crisis of belief. As it says in Mark 9:24, "I believe, help my unbelief!" The first disciples were stunned by the resurrection and struggled to understand how Jesus is the Son of the Father even though God is One. As the early church struggled to understand, so do we. It is in this light that the hymn says "Come, Holy Spirit,/show us the Father/Show us our place in/the life of the Son." Even if we do not literally cry out to the Holy Spirit by name when we cry out "help my unbelief" it is the Holy Spirit who comes to our aid. In the Trinity's relationship with humanity it is the Spirit's role to illuminate the relationship of the Father and Son so that we can see how we are included in that relationship through the Son's humanity. So after having sung of Jesus' revelation of the Kingdom and the Father through the resurrection the hymn now cries out to the Holy Spirit to help us understand this revelation.

The second verse is meant to express what it is that the Spirit reveals in answer to our prayer. He reveals that Jesus is the union of the joy and divinity of heaven with the anguish and humanity of all things in creation. This is the meaning of the lines “Joy and anguish,/Divine and human/Heaven and all things/joined in one Man” (Eph. 4:10, Col. 1:17). These lines point us to the reality that Jesus is fully God and fully Human and that in his own person heaven and earth have been brought together (John 1:14, Rev. 21:1-3). But it is a union that includes anguish because of humanity’s fallenness. In Jesus both the pain and joy of existence are found to be real and true. But the good news, the gospel, is that this union of heaven and all things in Jesus means that we have been “brought home to the Father” and now have a “new life” for which we give Jesus the glory (Eph. 2:6, 2:15). In answer to our prayer that the Spirit would show us our place in the life of the Son we are shown that everything that we are, joyful and agonizing, has been gathered up in the Son’s humanity and that heaven is dawning on us because we are now seated in Christ at home with the Father (Col. 3:1-4).

Now that we have encountered the risen Jesus and experienced the crisis of belief that this brings (verse 1) and now that the Holy Spirit has illuminated the life of the Son so that we can see our place in his relationship with the Father (verse 2) we are prepared, in verse 3, to at last sing our “Hymn to the Trinity.” The early Church experienced this very journey as they learned to not simply worship “the Lord” but to worship the Triune God by either singing praise “to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit” or by singing praise “to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Spirit.” Verse 3 opens with this ancient doxology but instead of just calling the Son the Son it calls him by name, i.e. “Jesus.” The challenge of Trinitarian worship is to affirm the three-ness of God while also affirming his unity as one. The second line reflects this need by saying “Praise to the Three/who love life as One.” This Father, Jesus, and Spirit who are praised in the first line of verse 3 are not three different gods, they are three persons of the one and only God. The choice of the phrase “love life” is very intentional in this line. The three persons of God do not just live, they live abundantly and filled with joy, loving their life together and the life they have created (John 10:10, 17:3). The next two lines of this verse are designed to help us celebrate and remember how the three Divine persons live as one God. Referencing Jesus’ revelation in John 14:10 and 26, the hymn sings of the “Father in Jesus,/Jesus in Father,/Spirit in their love.” The three are one because they live not only “with” each other but also “in” each other. This is what the Church Fathers called “perichoresis” – the mutually indwelling life of the persons of God by which they do nothing apart from each other. The Father, Son, and Spirit are forever united without losing the distinction of who they are as individuals, so the hymn ends with a final affirmation of the nature of the Triune Life by using a traditional Christian hymnic formula: “one God in three.”

A last note: you may notice that the Holy Spirit is mentioned explicitly in the first and third verses but verse two speaks only of the Father, the Son, and humanity. This structure is a further reflection of the Spirit’s role in illuminating the Father/Son relationship within God’s life and humanity’s place in that relationship through the Son. Like two spotlights placed on either side of an illuminated object, the Holy Spirit shines from verses 1 and 3 onto the Father/Son relationship of verse 2 and puts the central focus of the hymn (in the central verse of the hymn) on the life of the Son with the Father and the inclusion of humanity in that life.

~ Jonathan Stepp