

Prayer of the Month • July 2011

You truly, O Lord, are the pure and eternal fount of goodness; ... who did curse, and did bless; you did banish us from Paradise, and did recall us; you did strip off the fig-tree leaves ... and put upon us a costly garment; you did open the prison and did release the condemned; you did sprinkle us with clean water, and cleanse us from our filthiness. No longer shall ... the flaming sword encircle Paradise around, and make the entrance inaccessible to those that draw near; but all is turned to joy for us that were the heirs of sin; Paradise, yea, heaven itself may be trodden by man, and the creation, in the world and above the world, that once was at variance with itself, is knit together in friendship: and we ... are made to join in the angels' song, offering the worship of their praise.

from 'On the Baptism of Christ', Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c.394)



This is a marvellous prayer on the theme of our baptism, full of rich imagery, beginning with the idea of the 'fount', and going over the contrast between sin and sinless – reflecting on before and after, and focusing particularly on the expulsion from Paradise (Genesis 3.24). We tend to think of baptism as a good thing but not to think so much about our life without it. Yet it is precisely the contrast that brings out its importance. Admitted now to Paradise, we even have the honour of joining in with the song of the angels.

Gregory of Nyssa, was a younger brother of Basil of Caesarea and a friend of Gregory of Nazianzus. The three of them are known collectively as the Cappadocian Fathers, after the name of the region (in modern day Turkey) from which they originated. He was asked to be Bishop of Nyssa by his brother, Basil, who wanted an ally as a bishop near his see of Caesarea. Although Gregory had reservations, he did accede to the request. Building on the work of Basil, Gregory developed further the doctrine of the Trinity, distinguishing carefully between the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit. This is shown especially in his work, 'Why there are not three Gods'. Gregory also contributed to Christian theology in the area of spirituality, arguing that human knowledge only takes one so far, and that to know God one must progress from knowledge to experience, a theory he expounds in his *Life of Moses*, noting that Moses first encountered God in the burning bush, and later in the cloud, when he realises that God cannot be seen with the eyes. Gregory continues to reflect on Moses, that ascending Mount Sinai he realises that God cannot be known by the mind either, but only in the 'divine darkness'. In later life Gregory was much in demand as a preacher. He took part in the Council of Nicea in 325, and seems to have died soon afterwards. Although his feast day has traditionally been 10 January in the East and 9 March in the West, in the Church of England calendar it is 19 July, sharing the date with his sister, Macrina.

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