

God the Holy Trinity

Sermon · June 2017

Lord God Almighty, You send Your Word to bring us the truth and Your Spirit to make us holy. Through them we come to know the mystery of Your Holy Being. Help us to worship You, one God in three Persons, by proclaiming and living our faith in You. Grace our time of gathering today as Your people, that our prayers and our praise, words of our mouth and meditation of our hearts, our seeing and our hearing, may be as You desire them to be. Strengthen us, and through us bring glory to Your own most precious name, our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our choir sang the first and the last stanzas of this wonderful hymn, Holy, Holy, Holy. This song of adoration and worship of our Triune God is to prepare our hearts for a meaningful meditation that is acceptable in His sight. We worship and glorify one God who is three consubstantial Persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, the Trinity. To those with ears to hear, the chorus of praise to God is being sung constantly. The universe is like one giant choir that features a never-ending production of achingly beautiful melodies, and soaring crescendos of joy to the Creator.

At the outset let us be clear on one point: this is not polytheism, which is the worship of multiple deities, usually assembled into a pantheon of gods and goddesses, along with their own religions and rituals. We will have none of it. The Ten Commandments asserts, “I am the LORD your God, ... You shall have no other gods before Me.” Jesus affirmed this when He said, “The first of all the commandments is: ... the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” — Mark 12:29. At the same time, time and again we encounter passages in the Bible that tell us that the one God consists of more than one Person.

This is hard for us to understand. We should realise that it is not because of a logical contradiction in the very concept of the Trinity, but because of our limitations. The complexity and beauty of God’s Being, His unique nature, surpasses our understanding. He is, after all, God, and we are just mortals.

It is commonly remarked that the Trinity celebration differs from other Christian festivals in that, while they commemorate facts, Trinity commemorates a doctrine. The other Christian festivals of the year present the Lord God clothed in His works and miracles. For instance: on Christmas, we celebrate His incarnation; on Easter, His resurrection; on Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the Christian Church. The contrast might perhaps be better stated by saying that, while they commemorate facts occurring in time, facts cognisable by the senses, facts of external history, the Trinity festival alone commemorates a fact which transcends all experience, which is of no special time or place, which is eternal in the heavens, a celebration that existed in eternity past and will continue to exist through eternity future.

In the parting words of our Saviour to the disciples, in the charter of inauguration of His Church, stands the command that all henceforth who are incorporated into the family of God, all who claim the privilege of sonship in Christ through baptism by the Spirit, shall be incorporated, not merely ‘in the name,’ but in the stronger expression, ‘into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.’ This incorporation of the believer is into the family of a Triune God, a humanly incomprehensible configuration of a Three in One God.

Having said that, when we celebrate this Sunday as Holy Trinity Sunday, it requires us to instruct ourselves in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and to strengthen both our memory and faith concerning it. If we do not do that, we will fail to comprehend the very doctrine of Jesus Christ.

We see that all the other festivals present the Lord in the guise of a worker of one thing or another. But this Trinity festival discloses Him to us as He is in Himself. Here we see Him solely in His divine essence. We must go beyond and above all reasoning, leaving behind the evidence of created things, and hear only God’s own testimony concerning Himself and His inner essence. Let me confess that I am ill-equipped to make an exposition on the Trinity. I will not, therefore, offer you an in-depth discourse on the subject, which in itself is a great mystery of God; instead, I offer an overview, one that should be understood as a summary of the subject at its very surface level.

It is in our nature to try and reason out everything in our lives. We call it logical conclusion. Science provides us with the means and methods to conclusively prove something which is physical, and if we are unable to prove something scientifically, we quickly conclude that it is illogical and pass it on to the realm of fantasy, imagination, or even sheer madness. Seen from this perspective, how can we poor, mortal beings grasp this mystery of the Trinity? How can we, who do not understand the operation of our own physical powers — speech, laughter, sleep, things whereof we have

daily experience — pronounce upon the very nature of God? Therefore, we must accept what the Scriptures tell us, namely: that Jesus Christ is the true God, and that the Holy Spirit is likewise the true God, yet there are not three Gods, not three divine natures. There is just one indivisible Divine Essence, but at the same time we recognise a distinction as to the Persons. Let us, therefore, accept the fact that a doctrine, by its nature, is an abstraction, never referenced directly in Scripture. The expression “the Holy Trinity” is not mentioned anywhere in the Holy Book. It evolved around the third century.

In the Old Testament, there are various verses that distinguish between God the Father and God the Son. A clear example is Psalm 110:1, where David says: “The LORD says to my Lord...” Since David, as king, did not have any earthly lord, he must refer here to a heavenly Lord who is distinct from the LORD. Jesus confirms this when He claims this verse is about Him and implies that He is the Son of God (Matthew 22:41–45).

In other verses a distinction is made between the Lord and His Spirit. For example, in Genesis 1:2 we read, “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” Again, in Isaiah 48:16 we read, “And now the Lord GOD has sent Me, and His Spirit.” It is evident that someone cannot be thought of as apart from his spirit, yet a distinction is made here. Thus, in the Old Testament we find verses that point us towards God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God the Son did not come into existence with the birth of Jesus Christ; He is eternal, just like the Father and the Spirit. But in Jesus, He became flesh.

All through Pauline thought, we experience Paul’s anxiety to impress upon believers the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ. He also alluded to the Holy Spirit in no uncertain terms. Paul, speaking of Christ in Hebrews 1:3, refers to Him as the express image of God’s substance. In Colossians 1:15 he says of Christ: “Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” We must take these words for what they say: that all creatures, including angels and humankind, are ranked below Christ. This classification leaves room for only God: taking away the angels and creatures, what remains is God. It is one and the same thing, then, to say that Christ is the firstborn of all creatures and that Christ is the true and essential God.

Paul uses the expression “image of the invisible God.” His argument is that, if Christ is the image of God, He must be a Person distinct from God whose image He is, but at the same time of one divine essence with the Father. He and the Father are not one Person, but two, and yet Christ could not be the express image of the Father’s Person, or essence, if He were not equally divine and one with the Father. No creature can be an image of the divine substance, for it does not possess that essence. To repeat, Christ could not be called the express image of God if He and the Father were not distinct Persons; there must be one imaged and one who is the image. Scripture tells us that one Person is the Father, who in eternity begets the other; the other is the Son, begotten in eternity, yet both are equally eternal, mighty, wise, just, and one.

The same argument Luke employs substantially in Acts 20:28: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” This, too, is a significant text, proving beyond all controversy that Christ our Lord, who purchased the Church with His blood, is truly God, and to Him the Church belongs.

Now, having reasoned the existence of Christ in the Godhead, we must next consider the third Person, the Holy Spirit, in Scripture sometimes termed the “Spirit” of God. This Person is not spoken of as “born”; He is not begotten like the Son, but proceeds from the Father and the Son. To express it differently, He is a Person possessing in eternity the divine essence, which He derives from the Father and Son in unity, in the same way the Son derives it from the Father. There are, then, three distinct Persons in one divine essence, one divine majesty.

Now, when we are asked to explain the Trinity, our reply can only be that it is an incomprehensible mystery, beyond the understanding of angels and creatures, the knowledge of which is confined to the revelations of Scripture. Rightly did the Fathers compose the Creed, or Symbol, in the simple form repeated by Christians: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son... I believe in the Holy Ghost.” This confession we did not devise, nor did the Fathers of ancient times. As the bee collects honey from many fair and gay flowers, so is this Creed collected, appropriately brief, from the Holy Bible. It is fittingly called the Apostles’ Creed. For brevity and clarity, it could not have been better arranged, and it has remained in the Church from ancient time.

In summing up, I want to argue that to the Christian heart, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity says thus:

It tells us, first, that there is one, absolute, eternal Being, from Whom all things have proceeded, and unto Whom all shall return; that He dwells in light unapproachable; that He is infinite power, infinite justice, infinite wisdom — above all, He is infinite love. He is the Creator of the universe, and He is the Father of humankind. His design is stamped on the world without; and He is a Person.

Secondly, it tells us that God has manifested Himself, manifested Himself in creation and in history, manifested Himself

by special revelations from time to time. God the Word, God the Son, is the agent of this manifestation. As the crowning revelation of all, He became incarnate, took our nature upon Him, lived and died and rose as man. If Christ's Godhead is denied, then the union of man with God has not been established; then our redemption is not real, and our faith is vain. The reality of our redemption carries with it the deity of our Redeemer. And we cannot conceive of an incarnation without conceiving of a Person; we must believe in God the Son.

And lastly, it tells us that God is present in us and about us always; that He acts upon us by His invisible presence, His Holy Spirit; that, like the rhythms of the air, this mighty, unseen influence sweeps over us, coming we do not know from where, and going we know not where; that His presence is our teacher, our witness, our advocate, our comforter, above all our sanctifier; that so He is a Person, speaking directly to our personality, spirit to spirit, mind to mind, God the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, our theology should conform to the doctrine of a Triune God, in totality, and worship Jesus, thus worshipping God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit together. The divine and eternal union is quite unlike any union of persons or matters of this world. The Orthodox Churches of the East have a beautiful way of describing this. They use an ancient Greek word which means 'dancing in a circle.' This means that the three Persons, the modes of God, weave in and out of each other in a blissful, divine, dynamic, and eternal circle. Amen.