

Sermon

Trinity 2009

Isaiah 6:1-10

John 3:1-17

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When I did a motoring tour of some of the European continent with Laura a few years ago, I would seek out the main place of worship in the town or city that we were visiting, and more often than not this place of worship was Catholic.

I therefore had an opportunity to study the interiors of these places of worship, many of which were extensively decorated with images.

I remember that in addition to the depictions of Christ and Mary and various saints, there were also depictions of the Holy Trinity.

These often consisted of an old man with white hair and long white beard who was supposed to represent God the Father; a younger bearded man who was supposed to represent Jesus; and a white dove supposed to represent the Holy Spirit.

I'm afraid such images bring out the iconoclast in me, because I cannot understand how such depictions are supposed to help us to understand the nature of God as Trinity rightly.

These depictions of an old man, a young man and a bird arguably give the impression that we worship three gods.

And this scene was complicated further by an addition of a fourth figure: a woman who I took to represent Mary, with the result that was depicted was arguably the worship of four gods.

If someone had handed me a tin of whitewash and a paintbrush I may have done something rash that would have landed me in the local jail!

In saying this, I don't mean to single-out Catholic iconography, because there are images in Eastern Orthodoxy and high-church Protestantism that are just as misleading.

What I object to is taking concepts of God over-literally that are supposed to be analogies.

For example, when we use the terms Father and Son of the persons of the Trinity we are using human terms that undergo a change when applied to God.

In any analogy, there has to be some similarity between the term that is used and how it is applied; thus God the Father and Jesus his Son have a similar relationship as a human Father and a Son.

But also in an analogy, there is difference.

Thus God the Father and Jesus his Son are unlike a human Father and Son in that they are not two individuals but are spiritual persons who indwell one another as one being.

The same principle of analogy is applied to the Holy Spirit who may be said to be like a dove that freely descends and ascends at will; but is unlike a dove in that he is the spiritual person who brings to completion the work of the Father and Son.

Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century had a highly-developed understanding of analogy.

For example, when Mary sings of God "He has shown strength with his arm", Aquinas writes we are not to imagine that God literally has a strong arm, but that God is powerful and that his power has tangible effects.

As children, we quite naturally take terms such as Father and Son literally as extensions of our own experience.

But this Sunday School understanding needs to develop and grow into a more mature understanding; and the teaching or doctrine of the Church helps us in our understanding.

For example, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, to the question 'What is God?' does not reply "an old man with a white beard and flowing robes"! It replies "God is a spirit, whose being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth are infinite, eternal and unchangeable."

In the Dream of Gerontius, a Christian poem by John Henry Newman, set to music by Edward Elgar, one section of verse goes: "Firmly I believe, and truly, God is three and God is one."

When put this way, such a belief sounds like a logical contradiction. Surely God is either three or one?

Why don't Christians just decide one way or the other and stop trying to have our cake and eat it too.

Yet the Church teaches that God is one in continuity with Old Testament belief.

But the Church also teaches that Jesus Christ reveals God and is the Son of the God he called his Father.

And the Church also teaches that we come to know Jesus and God through their Holy Spirit who proceeds from them.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not three gods but the three eternal persons who mutually indwell one another as one God. Every action of the one God is initiated by the Father, enacted by the Son and completed by the Spirit. Part of that completion is when we, by the Spirit's enabling, respond through the Son to God the Father. The reason Christians came to make a differentiation in the one being of God was because of who they believed Jesus was and their experience of the Holy Spirit. They believed that Jesus is God's only Son, whom God the Father sent not to judge the world but to save it. As we heard in our second reading from the Gospel According to John, "the Son of Man must be lifted up, in order that everyone who has faith may in him have eternal life." (3:14-15) Jesus will be lifted up first on the shameful cross, where he will bear the scorn and sin of the world, and will die. Three days later Jesus will be resurrected to new life by God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. And a short time after this Jesus will be lifted up from the earth as he ascends to be with the Father and the Holy Spirit. By his life, death, resurrection and ascension Jesus reveals that he is the way to God to the Father, he reveals the truth of who God is, and by the Spirit's action he gives us access to the life of God, which is why everyone who puts their faith and trust in him may have eternal life.

We need God's help to put our faith and trust in Jesus and so enter into God's Kingdom. As Jesus says to Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from water and spirit. Flesh can give birth to flesh; only spirit can give birth to spirit." (3:5-6)

Jesus says to Nicodemus and to us, that we need to undergo a second birth—a birth from above—that begins to put to death our reliance on self and makes us alive to the help that the Holy Spirit gives. With Nicodemus, we ask, "How is this possible?" Humanly it is impossible, but with God nothing is impossible.

In the Gospel we learn that Jesus relates to God like a Father and that we too can know God as our Father if we will put our faith and trust in Jesus.

But how can we put our faith and trust in Jesus? Surely this leap toward one we cannot see is a leap too far; one that stretches our credulity to breaking-point? And, indeed, there are many others whom we can see who compete for our faith and trust: family; friends; political leaders and parties; and ideologies. We must decide throughout life how much of our faith and trust these competing claims warrant. But Jesus' claim to our faith and trust is of a different order, for only he claims to be sent by God the Father, because of God's love for the world, so that everyone who has faith in him may have eternal life. And only Jesus promises to send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth who will dwell in us and remind us of Jesus' teaching. It is from the good news of the gospel itself that we come to understand that God is Triune, that is, three persons in one being. This gospel is intensely practical, for it draws from our experience of family life to provide an analogy to help us to know God. God is both the same as and different from a human Father. He is the same as a human Father who loves his children, who wants the best for them, and who makes every effort to be reconciled to them when they become estranged. He is different from a human Father in that his Son, through whom he reconciles the world to himself, is eternally begotten of the Father and of one being with him. Proceeding eternally from Father and Son, and sharing one being with them, is the Holy Spirit who brings to completion the Father's will and the Son's work. We will never fully understand the mystery that is God the Holy Trinity; yet because we cannot fully understand we are asked not to reject but to adore. As Isaac Watts writes of God, the "mysterious three and undivided one":

"Where reason fails, with all her powers,
there faith prevails, and love adores."
Amen