

The Mystery and Mission of the Trinity

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: June 4, 2023

Readings

Genesis 1.1-2.3

Psalm 150

2 Corinthians 13.5-14

Matthew 28.16-20

Opening

Much of his story sounds similar to other bishops of the early church. Hilary of Poitiers grew up with the benefit of a classical education and he was destined for a life in public office. Nearing the end of his education, he experienced an inner emptiness that sent him to the scriptures. Not a few others like him converted to Christianity because of reading the Bible, but the specific passage that grabbed Hilary's heart was surprising. One might expect that a Gospel passage like John 3.16 or a meditation on love like 1 Corinthians 13 would seize his heart; instead, Hilary was gripped by Exodus 3.14, when God spoke to Moses from a bush burning revealing his Name, 'I Am that I Am.' Hilary had been trained a scholar of ancient philosophy, yet this mystery, this Name alone, seized his heart more than any philosophy he ever read. Soon thereafter he was baptized. Later he would become a bishop in ancient France and one of the strongest defenders of the Trinity in the age of the creeds, the 4th century, known in the Church as the 'Athanasius of the West'.¹ Though he became a great theologian of the Trinity, Hilary's first encounter with the Lord was the mystery of God—the mystery of his Name.

Think of that for a moment: the mystery of God became the catalyst for a pagan to be baptized in the Name of the Trinity. Here is an ancient conversion story with a missional purpose for our time; that the depths of God's inner life offers vital gateway for evangelism in our day, too. More on that later.

To conclude Hilary's story, it's significant that when he was baptized he wasn't baptized in the Name, 'I am that I am.' No, he was baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. I share Hilary's story because he represents our experience with the unfolding revelation of God in Scripture and the Church. The God who revealed himself in creation saying, 'Let Us make man in our image, after our likeness,' is the same God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush with the Name 'I AM Who I AM.' This God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit who dwells within our very bodies.

¹ Robert Louis Wilkes, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 86.

Writing in 361 A.D., St Gregory of Nazianzus explained God's wisdom in this gradual revelation of his Name and Nature, both in Scripture and in the Church, saying

*the Old Testament revealed the Father clearly, but the Son dimly. The New Testament revealed the Son (but only) implied the divinity of the Spirit. Today the Spirit lives amongst us and makes himself more clearly known. It would actually have been dangerous openly to proclaim the Son while the divinity of the Father was not fully acknowledged, and then, before the divinity of the Son was accepted, to add as it were...the Holy Spirit. It was more fitting that by adding a little at a time...the splendor of the Trinity should shine forth progressively.*²

Gregory answers a longstanding question I've had since I was a boy: why doesn't the Bible just say clearly in chapter and verse, 'There is only one God in Three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?' And the answer is simple: because 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, saith the Lord.' When I ponder this question further, I see God's wisdom: the mystery of one God in Three Persons is not a matter of intellectual assent alone, it is an encounter, a personal experience of God's mystery that only comes through faith and prayer.

God has revealed depths of his inner life so that we will commune with him 'from the inside,' as it were. That's his mission—that we are fed by the life that constantly circulates among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That is not only orthodox, trinitarian doctrine, that's the Gospel we have to proclaim.

Last week on Pentecost, I mentioned that the Gospel doesn't end with the forgiveness and cleansing of sin by the cross of Christ. The Gospel goes further than forgiveness. Redemption is not only the removal of our guilt or shame. Redemption does not mean 'pardon' in Scripture; redemption literally means 'to bring back.' Redemption brings you home—home into the eternal communion of God in Three Persons; home into the communion of saints, the Church, with all brothers and sisters who have been baptized in the same Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If the Gospel we've been proclaiming doesn't require all Three Persons of the Trinity, we don't have the whole Gospel. I love Olivier Clement's formula for describing one God in Three Persons: God beyond us, the Father and (creator) of all that is; God with us, the Incarnate Son who died for us that we might live; God in us, the Breath, the Life-giver who brings all things to the perfection for which they were made.³

That we would live and flourish in the mystery of God in Three Persons, not merely walking through the entrance, not simply crossing the threshold, but live deeply in the communion that is the triune God—that is the mission of the Holy Trinity. And that is the Gospel we have to proclaim.

The Mystery of the Image

In my life as a Christian, I've had no few occasions when churches or ministries have trained me to proclaim the Gospel. I learned a few different methods of presenting the Gospel. None that I remember began with Genesis 1.26-27:

² Gregory Nazianzen, *Fifth Theological Oration*, 31.26

³ Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 63.

'Let Us make man in our image, after our likeness..So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'

We would do well to go back, not only to Genesis, but to the way our church fathers evangelized an unbelieving world. 'The traces of the Trinity are within you,' St Augustine would say. And what are those traces? We'll come back to that in a moment, but for now, let's say what's most important about the image of God within: because God is an eternal communion of love and joy among three divine persons, we crave relationship with the Holy Trinity. We crave communion with the Lord *and* his saints because the imprint on our souls is to know and be known, to love and be loved.

And so, my brothers and sisters, lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest, even in a world marching to the drum of secular humanism. In my lifetime, I don't know when so many have been asking the question, 'what does it mean to be human?' Discourse on this question has never gone away, but it has risen rapidly in the past decade. And it's going to increase more and more, especially with the advent of artificial intelligence.

The late Tim Keller, may he rest in peace and rise in glory, had a profound ministry of evangelism in our secular age, especially with this question. I read earlier this week of a young academic influenced by Keller, who later converted to Christianity. She said, 'Keller's aim was never to make the Gospel any less outrageous but to make our own private idols moreso. He wanted to help sincere and restless people (and that's most of us) finally see the false gods we are worshipping—whether we realize it or not.'⁴

The fields are white for harvest, especially when we present a vision of fullness in the true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Treasuring the Mystery of Persons

Christians do not say, 'We believe in one God in Three Individuals.' We believe in one God in Three *Persons*. The image of God in human beings has been distorted and disfigured by individualism, the false god of the self. It is a false god exercising a fierce tyranny, especially in our western world. The tragic irony of individualism is that when we chase our individual desires, when we finally get the things we've wanted, we often find that we are empty and alone. We are the most technologically advanced, most affluent society in all of human history, yet, in the words of Patrick Deneen, we are 'increasingly separate, autonomous, non-relational selves replete with rights and defined by our liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid and alone.'⁵

Enter the Gospel of the Trinity to redeem and restore the Image of God within. Among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is no spirit of taking, of seizing what is 'mine.' No, the attitude within the Godhead, revealed by Jesus in the Gospels, is one of giving and receiving; of offering one's self in love and sacrifice. So when the pursuit of one's wants and freedom leaves one bereft and lost, we can speak of communion and fullness by *belonging*—belonging to one God in Three Persons; belonging to his Church.

But to enter that communion, we must die and be reborn. In the words of the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, in baptism 'the individual dies and a person is reborn.' The language of personhood is

⁴ Molly Worthen, "Tim Keller's Critique of Liberal Secularism," *The Atlantic*

⁵ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 16.

not only vital for right doctrine; it is vital for vital living. An individual lives in, from, and for himself. A person lives in communion with, from, and for others.

The word 'person' is cherished among orthodox Christians, not only because it was the word embraced by the church fathers who formulated our creeds and Trinitarian faith, but because it expresses the mystery of God, divine persons, and ourselves, human beings.

What is a person? If you were asked to describe your closest friend, your spouse, or a parent, immediately you are aware that description is an impossible task. Try to list some qualities and it seems shallow and terribly inadequate. Tell a few stories and perhaps you have a better sense of a person, yet even a signature story cannot capture the depths of the person you describe. *Because a person escapes all definitions, all adjectives, all experiences and stories.* The more we know of a person, the more we discover what we don't know, how much more there is to discover!⁶ The name of the person is not a sum of their qualities, but the expression of a marvelous, vast mystery. This is true for each human being because each human being bears the image of one God in Three Persons. And if this mystery of persons is true for human beings, how much more so with the divine persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!

Freedom of Persons, Unity of Communion

Not only do we have a Gospel message to share about the mystery of persons, made in the Image of God, we can also share the message of true freedom among persons, too. For two thousand years, saints have gazed upon the paradox of the oneness of God and the threeness of Persons in the Godhead. There is a unity of communion—one God—yet there is freedom among the persons to be themselves, to be utterly unique, yet utterly belong to one another.

Dimitri Staniloae explains the paradox of freedom and belonging when he says:

Love is characterized by this paradox: On the one hand it unites subjects who love each other, on the other, it doesn't confuse their identity. Love brings one subject to another, without merging their identities, because in this case love would cease. It would kill the persons who love each other, it wouldn't assure them of a permanent existence.⁷

Only one God in Three Persons can create, sustain, and perfect this kind of freedom. In this fallen world, we fail to honor one another's uniqueness and freedom. God in Three Persons lives in self-giving communion, whereas we can seek to control or possess one another. The parent can idolize his child, placing all his hopes for personal fulfillment in the child's endeavors, losing his own identity. A wife can place her husband on a pedestal, or vice versa. When relationships deteriorate into co-dependency, into possessing or smothering one another, return to the Trinity and behold a vision of unity and yet freedom where each person can be themselves.

The Son is united in self-giving love to the Father and Spirit, but not lost in them. The Father freely offered his own Son to be incarnate for our sake; the Son freely offered his obedience to the Father,

⁶ Olivier Clement, *On Human Being*, 30.

⁷ *Dumitru Staniloae, Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, 52-53.

even to death on the cross; the Spirit moves in freedom to dwell within us. Freedom circulates among the Trinity, but it always leads them *toward* one another, never *away* from one another.

When you are baptized in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you do not cease to be yourself; you become, for all eternity, who God created you to be. The Holy Spirit working within you will perfect you into the 'You' he created you to be.

Conclusion

I believe that when the church boldly embraces the mystery of the Trinity, we will be simultaneously both active and contemplative in our faith. We will contemplate the deep mystery of God in Three Persons and the mystery of his image in human beings. When we gaze upon the mystery of God, we become more serious about the mission of God in the world. And consider this: we're *joining* the mission of the triune God that began in that moment when the Lord said, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness'; when he spoke his divine Name to Moses in the burning bush; when he revealed his Son through the manger, the cross, and the resurrection; when he descended by his Holy Spirit to dwell in his saints forever. So let us pray fervently in this time when the fields are white with harvest that more sons and daughters will be baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; whom we worship, love, and adore; who alone is worthy of glory unto ages of ages. Amen.