

The Happy Land of the Trinity

**John 17:1-5, 20-26;
2 Corinthians 4:1-6;
Isaiah 12:1-6**

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Last week we introduced the doctrine, the reality, or better, the living subject of the Holy Trinity. Christian believe, we said, that there is One God, who exists in three persons; and that those three persons, in their communion of love and light, just are the one God. And it is the destiny of the redeemed, to see, to love, and, in joy and delight and wonder, to worship this God – not through Word or Sacrament, nor by means of any created instrument, not even by faith – but face to face, by sight, in glory. A people in everlasting communion with the Triune God Himself, in a perfected and unbreakable bond of union and fellowship with the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son, in the Spirit.

Now, this God, as Holy Trinity, cannot be read off the face of nature. Creation might show the glory of God, as Psalm 19 has it, or, it may reveal God's eternal power and divine nature, so as to leave all without excuse (as Romans 1 has it). So, One knows from creation that God exists. And a number of other features about God's nature (his wisdom and power for example) can be deduced from creation. But neither creation, or our reasoning from creation, discloses the ultimate mystery, namely, that God is Triune, existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For this, something beyond natural revelation is needed. Special redemptive revelation, what is unveiled in Jesus Christ, and the coming of the New Covenant. We see this in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus says:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father... and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

The Father is not known, as Father, except by the Son, in the bond of the HS. And vice versa. But the Son can reveal the Father if he so chooses, and that is what occurs in the incarnate life of Jesus — Whoever has seen me, has now seen the Father. As John puts it: No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he (X) has made him known.

This, and this alone, is the way to Trinity, to what Fred Sanders has called the Happy Land of the Trinity. The Land above all worlds, where God dwells in everlasting blessedness, as God. Put differently, we need to know God as he is

for us, in Jesus Christ, before we can know God, as he is *in himself* as Father, Son and Spirit. So, we will make three points this morning. First, God for us. Second, God in Himself, and third, God centeredness. God for us, God in himself, God centeredness.

I. God for Us

First, God for us. Now, this is a vast topic, and we are not going to do anything too ambitious here. Rather, I want to focus on something narrow. Namely, given what God has done in Christ, for our redemption, what are the implications of that for the being of God. This is an acute problem that many Christians are not really attuned to, because we take so much for granted, that the early Christians could not have taken for granted.

The Trinity – even though its often viewed this way – the Trinity is not some speculative, abstract, highly philosophical development, that the later church came up with in isolation from Scripture. The Trinity is what you get, when you reflect on the fact, that the Son and the Spirit have been sent into the world to save sinners. The startling, shocking explosion of Jesus Christ, is what drives the church into the Trinitarian mystery. Jesus cracks open Jewish monotheism, if you will, and sends us reeling, forcing the early church to ask primal questions about who he is, and then, about just who God must be, to be the One who sent this Jesus.

Try and put yourself in the position of the earliest disciples, especially those who were Jews. This Jesus comes, teaching and working miracles, and making repeated divine claims. Then, he is raised from the dead, and later, pours out the Spirit. From the beginning, then, he is worshipped and confessed as God, the sheer force of his person and his work ensure this (in fact, demand this). And yet, this is a crisis. If you're a Jewish monotheist who believes the Lord your God is One, then worshipping Jesus either, makes you a polytheist – you worship two gods --- or it makes you an idolator – you worship a human being.

Somehow, because of the revelation that takes place in Jesus Christ, he must somehow become part of, or be integrated into, the identity of Yahweh. You can imagine how traumatic this might be for first century monotheists. How ridiculous or impossible it would appear to many. How novel and heretical and strange. And yet, One has stood in the midst of us, in the midst of Israel, and declared: I and the Father are One. Before Abraham was-- I AM. And that One has been raised, and that One has poured out the Spirit. And thus, in narrating this One's life, in tracing his story, the church realized that she could not end, even with his long and ancient human ancestry. This one was SENT from the Father, was given, came forth, from the womb of Mary AND from some other place. He was then, controversially, pre-existent. And his story begins, then, like this: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in

the beginning with God. In fact, he would be described by the author of Hebrews as the very radiance of the glory of God. In encountering this One, the apostles realized, that they were face to face, with, as 1 John puts it:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—

And they spoke and wrote thus: so that, with them, we may have fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And now, against their will, without choosing this path, the early church is knee-deep in what would later be called Trinitarian theology. And over the next 300+ years they would refine, and argue, and fight with heretics, and hammer out, the implications of what they saw and handled in Jesus Christ. Namely, that behind God with us, is the glory of God. Thus, as we saw in our New Testament lesson, it is the glory of God which we see shining in the face of Jesus Christ (Transfiguration). And that glory is the infinite and eternal life of God in himself, as Father, Son and Spirit, dwelling above all worlds in the Happy Land of the Trinity.

II. God in Himself

That brings us to our second point, God in Himself. Jesus, we saw, is eternal Son, Son of one called Father. And thus, the church came to see that the Father is called father first and foremost for Trinitarian reasons. Not because he becomes our father in the gospel, grand as that is, but because he has always been Father of the Son. Gregory of Nyssa (4th c.) says the Son is of the Father, and the Father is never without the Son; for it is impossible that glory should be without radiance; as it is impossible that the lamp should be without brightness. And, in the same way, Jesus is Son, first and foremost, for Trinitarian reasons. Not because he makes us sons, grand as that is, but because he has always been the Son of the Father. The radiance of the glory of God has always shined in its brilliance.

Less clearly, and a bit more slowly, the church came to see this Father-Son bond of fellowship, was a bond sustained in the communion of the Holy Spirit. And thus, before creation, before redemption, before the foundation of the world, this God, this Triune Communion existed. This was, and is, the Happy Land of the Trinity. And while this divine life transcends us, and remains a mystery beyond our control, or our full comprehension, yet we can say a good deal about it from Scripture.

Jesus says, in John's gospel, chapter 17: And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence, with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

There is an eternal sharing of glory between the Father and the Son. Jesus speaks there also of the love with which the Father loved him, before the foundation of the world.

One early 20th c. New Testament scholar said: nothing shines more radiantly in the New Testament than the eternal love of the Father for the Son. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. He declares him to be his beloved Son at his baptism, long before he has accomplished the work he was given to do.

So intimate is this communion, that in that same magnificent chapter, Jesus says that the Father is IN the Son and the Son is in the Father. The persons are distinct and yet interior to each other. Theologians refer to this as perichoresis – mutual indwelling of persons. So this is a communion of blessedness, love, glory, light and life. A dynamic communion of mutual self-giving and delight, between the Father and the Son, in the Holy Spirit. So we have come to realize that behind the revelation, behind even creation itself, we are being pointed to an eternal conversation. Chesterton gets at this wonderfully when he writes:

The meanest man in grey fields gone. Behind the set of sun. Heareth between star and other star; Through the door of the darkness fallen ajar; The counsel, eldest of things that are, The talk of the Three in One.

This is the most basic, most primitive, reality. Thus, Athanasius in the 4th c. famously said: It is more pious, and more accurate to signify God from the Son, and call Him Father, that to name Him from his works and call him Unoriginate (uncaused Creator of all). Put simply: God is Father before he is creator/redeemer. God is essentially Father, eternally Father, never ever without the Son or the Spirit;-- but Creator, that is something which comes later, which comes by free choice, and not of necessity. Thus the church confesses: I believe in one God, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, then – maker of heaven and earth. The order is important. Father first, then creator. Eternally Father, freely Creator.

Trinity precedes creation. The Happy Land of the Trinity is above and before all worlds. This, though we grasp but the outskirts, the hem of the garment, this is (at least an introduction to) what we mean when we speak of the Holy Trinity. Truly this is a fount of wonder, an ineffable and sublime mystery.

III. God-centeredness

Finally, then, God-centeredness. What might be some of the big-picture, low-hanging fruit for us to grasp, once we see that God is for us, *so that* we might come to see and know God in himself. Well, most basically, a deep God-centeredness. A being ravished by the Holy Trinity above all other attachments.

A being severed from all else, such that it looks small and is deeply relativized. A recognition that God is not to be correlated to our families, to our projects, our politics, to our country, or even to our ministries, to our Christian undertakings, that he towers majestically above all things, and that He alone, without competitors, is the object of our passion, our love, our adoration, our praise and worship. That we are marked for, journeying toward, and destined to arrive in, the happy land of the Trinity. That the whole point of everything, the whole point of the revelation and the work of God in Christ, is to bring us to God: Father, Son and Spirit. That he is the End, the *telos*, the goal.

Indeed, it is the Trinity who is the fountain from which the waters of salvation flow, the wealth, which funds the riches that are ours in Christ. Salvation is not a gift, detachable from God himself, but is rather participation in the very life of God, sharing in the mutual love of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit – that is eternal life. Or, in the explicit language of Scripture: God IS our Salvation. We heard this in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah:

“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”

Thus, Isaiah continues: With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation – that is, you will drink of the refreshing life of the Trinity itself. The Trinity IS our salvation.

The gospel, then, is called the gospel OF GOD. God is the origin, the substance, and the goal of the gospel (gospel centered churches, should be God-centered churches). Paul calls the gospel, in 1 Timothy the gospel of the glory of the blessed God. We are pretty good at seeing the importance of the gospel of God, but we are much weaker at seeing the importance of the God of the gospel.

The cure for this? Recognizing that the gospel directs us to something, the only thing greater than the gospel, namely the life of the Triune God. God’s life is better than the gospel. The salvation of sinners is a great affair, a wondrous thing, but the life of God is greater, much, much greater. In fact, Jonathan Edwards thought that seeing how great God, and the things of God are, IN THEMSELVES, apart from us, was a sign of genuine conversion.

Here's another way to put this. The work of Jesus, his incarnation, his life, death, resurrection. His saving work for sinners. Is a thing of astonishing wonder, a cause for eternal praise. But, his person, his being as the eternal Son of the Father, his being God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the image of the invisible God, the radiance of the Father’s glory --- his person is infinitely greater than his work. (proportion of Scripture tricks us)The being of God is greater than the acts of God, God’s life is greater than the gospel. This is the God-centeredness produced by contemplating the Trinity. This is what it means to think from a center outside of ourselves.

To recognize that neither we, nor our families, nor our culture, nor our salvation, are the center of things. This is the Trinitarian displacement of self --- even of Christian selves. As Fred Sanders says: we ought to take God so seriously, that we consider him more interesting than ourselves (American politics). The reason for this, of course, is that he is more interesting, infinitely so.

Indeed, he who is to be our great preoccupation, is our life and our salvation. Glory be to the Trinity, to the God who is for us in Christ, that we might delight in God as He is in himself. Amen.

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