

“While We Own the Mystery”

Dr. Alister McGrath: *“Once upon a time there was a committee. It had three members. Now committees are things which exist to find something to do. And so they set up a project. It was a complicated and long-term development project which took a long time to get off the ground. But it eventually got going, and the committee was pleased with the way it seemed to be working. The project was a long way from the committee's offices, however, so communication was something of a problem. Soon the project developed some teething problems, so the chairman paid occasional visits to it, firing some of its directors and hiring new ones. But things got worse, and the committee realized that it would have to monitor the project on a more long-term basis. So the three of them decided that one of them would have to spend some time living and working on the project, and put things right. But which one would it be? ‘Not me!’ said the chairman. ‘Someone has to stay back at the office and keep an eye on things here.’ And so the other two committee members drew straws, and the short straw was drawn by Mr. Davidson. So Mr. Davidson was sent off to the project. ‘Don't forget to keep in touch—and we'll expect a full report from you on your return’ were the parting words of the chairman.”*

For many people that is the image of the Trinity. In this image, Jesus is basically one member of the divine committee, the one who was sent down to earth to report on things and put things right with the creation. There are several images that the Bible uses for God — shepherd, spirit, parent, light, and rock are the dominant models — but nowhere is God described as a committee.

The Athanasian Creed states, *“Whoever wants to be saved should think thus about the Trinity.”* So this is not merely a matter of right thinking, or about winning an argument. The early church recognized that our eternal well-being was tied up in embracing the truth about the nature of the Trinity.

Before I go any farther, let me address an issue that comes up just about every Trinity Sunday. In the Athanasian Creed, we confess: *“At his [i.e. Jesus’] coming all people shall rise bodily to give an account of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.”* Invariably, someone will come to me to ask: *“Does that say that our works will save us?”* or something to that effect. Let me at least try to correct any misconceptions.

The Latin here uses the word *facere*, of which one translation is “do.” From this Latin root we get the word “fashion,” not in the sense of Christian Dior or DKNY, but in the sense that God “fashioned” Adam from the dust. What the Creed is saying is that those who are shaped by good, or those who are shaped by evil, will endure the resultant effects of such lives. To be shaped by good is to be found in Christ, which is grace. To be shaped by evil is to reject grace in favor of some way to salvation of your own devising. So, no, it does not promote the idea that our eternal well-being is decided on the basis of our good deeds.

Now, back to embracing the truth about the Trinity. What leads people to this committee idea? Bad teaching. We have so messed up the concept of the Trinity in our age, that we are left with barely anything worth believing. So I hope this morning to provide you with some images that I pray will open you to see the Trinity in a new light, and embrace its truth.

Our difficulties begin with the fundamental insight that Jesus is God incarnate: that in the face of Jesus we see none other than the living God. Page after page of the New Testament bears witness to this truth. Jesus is understood to act as God and for God. Whoever sees Him, He says, sees God. When He speaks, He speaks with the authority of God. When He makes promises, He does so on God’s behalf. When He makes judgments, it is God who is judging. He forgave sins as only God can do. On and on ... The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus was active in the process of creation itself.

But now we have to wrestle with that witness.

In one sense, Jesus is God; in another, He is not. Jesus is God incarnate; yet He still prays to God without any indication that He is talking to Himself. Here's our dilemma: Jesus is God on earth; yet God remains in heaven, as the German Christmas hymn intones: *"The Word becomes incarnate And yet remains on high."*

Let's see if we can make sense of this. Let's suppose that you take a vacation to the East Coast, say Myrtle Beach or Cape Cod. There you encounter this thing called The Atlantic Ocean. You swim in it, float on it, walk along its shore. Its wetness is very wet; its vastness, vast; it is blue on sunny days, a little gray when it's overcast. In truth, you have experienced the Atlantic Ocean. Or have you? Did you really experience all of the Atlantic Ocean? Of course not, but you have had an encounter with it.

How about another example. Remember when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon? He and other Apollo astronauts brought back "moon rocks" so that scientists could study them. Do you imagine that the experience of the scientists in the lab with those rocks was equivalent to the astronaut's experience of stepping onto the moon's surface? Hardly. Yet both can be said to have come to know more about the moon.

Now let's take both those illustrations back to the issue of Jesus as God. The New Testament affirms that Jesus really is God, but this does not allow us to say that Jesus and the Father are identical. The moon rock was not identical with the moon; Myrtle Beach is not identical with the Atlantic Ocean. Yet we experience both in a new and direct way.

Jesus allows us to experience God. Because He is God, we come to know what God is like; we have a direct encounter with the reality of God. The doctrine of the Incarnation affirms that it really is God that we encounter in Jesus Christ, just as it affirms that God remains God throughout. Much that same thing can be said of our encounters with the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to our next fundamental problem: How are we to make

sense of this complicated New Testament witness to the nature of God? We come at this with two basic questions: 1) When we talk of God, which God do we mean? 2) How do we encounter this God?

If we look at the Old Testament witness about God, we discover two things: 1) Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad; ***“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”*** 2) This God has acted in human history. We have to tell the story of this interaction in order to understand who God is.

We do this in other situations: If I say to you: *“You know John Fairfax,”* and you look at me with that blank look — yeah, that one — I realize you do not know him. So I tell you *“He’s the man who rowed solo across the Atlantic and finished the trip the same day that Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon.”* Still, you’re fuzzy, because this is the first you’re hearing about this feat, and that Fairfax was the first person to do this, and that it took him 180 days. The more information I can give you, the more you know about John Fairfax.

Now, here’s our problem: I have never met John Fairfax . . . never seen him . . . wouldn’t know him if I fell over him . . . in fact, all I know about the man I have told you just now. All I have is the name and this one thing he did.

So it is with God. The Old Testament has a lot to say about God’s name: Yahweh. But the primary theme is God’s activity: called Abraham, protected Joseph, got us out of Egypt, gave us a land, sent us to Exile, brought us home, . . . From the New Testament perspective, this activity culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity, it can be fairly stated, is a summary of the story of God’s dealings with His people. This is the God we talk about.

But now the second issue: How do we encounter this God? The Bible gives us two answers: 1) He may be found in Jesus. 2) He may be experienced in the Holy Spirit. Okay, how do we encounter Jesus? The

answer: through the Spirit. The Spirit represents Jesus Christ to us in order that we may gain access to the Father through Jesus. The doctrine of the Trinity does not explain how it is that God is able to be present in this remarkable way — it simply affirms that God is present and available in this manner.

We begin to see why the doctrine talks of God as “Three-in One.” But it is precisely with that language that we encounter a massive problem: How can God be three persons and one person at the same time? Part of our problem is the way language evolves. The word “person” does not mean today what it meant in the Third Century when the doctrine was being refined.

When we think of “person” we mean the individual; when theologians like Tertullian and Origen used the Latin word *persona* that had something else in mind. If you go to a play, sometimes the actors will be listed in the program under the heading “Personae Dramatis” — and it will list the name of the actor next to the role he or she is taking in that play. That’s what the doctrine of the Trinity is getting at: the three great roles in the Divine Drama are all played by the same actor. Each of these roles reveals God in a somewhat different way, but it is the same God in every case. It is God, and God alone, who masterminded and executes the great plan of salvation, culminating in Jesus Christ. It is He who is present and active at every stage of this long history.

We are invited to be in the presence of this God; not just to visit near His dwelling on occasion, but to become immersed in Him as we would become immersed in that vast Atlantic Ocean. For, while it is true that our visit to Myrtle Beach or Cape Cod is not an experience of all that is the Atlantic Ocean, it is equally true that our visit is more than us sitting here six hundred miles away talking about what that experience could be like.

God does care that we comprehend the truth about Him, as the Creed says: “*Whoever wants to be saved should think thus about the Trinity.*” But what God wants more than anything is that we come into His

presence, spend time with Him, find comfort, solace, strength in His embrace.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not invented; it was uncovered by men and women who sat, stood, knelt, and laid prostrate in the presence of the God who acts in history. He invites us to sit, and stand, and kneel, and lay ourselves down before Him, “*And adoring, bend the knee, while we own the mystery.*” What we cannot comprehend, God will bless with His presence. What we mess up, God will restore with His presence. What we lack, God will fill with His presence.

In His presence the mystery fades into the experience of Him . . . just of Him . . . only Him . . . all of Him.

Amen.