

The Experience of God is Salvation

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Scripture: Acts 10:34-48; I John 4:7-16

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In the liturgical year that we follow, this is Trinity Sunday. It is the Lord's Day following Pentecost which we celebrated last week, the Festival of the Holy Spirit, and it concludes another cycle of the Christian Year that begins four Sundays before Christmas with the Advent Season.

There is a certain logic to designating this day Trinity Sunday because we have gone through the cycle that moves through the history of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and presence in the Holy Spirit.

There is probably no more philosophically difficult theological discussion than that which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity, or the Triune God - that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are one God. The originating language was the conceptuality of Greek philosophy and the long history of dispute was in part the fact that the Eastern Church used Greek while the Western Church used Latin.

The problem the doctrine of the Trinity was attempting to solve was how these Jewish monotheists who brought the Gospel to the Gentile world could maintain that monotheism, that God is One, while speaking of Jesus as God in human flesh, God incarnate. And not only Jesus Christ as God incarnate, but as with them still as Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ.

The discussions were philosophically sophisticated, often acrimoniously asserted and politically motivated. We do not think any longer in the philosophical language and conceptuality of the Greek world of those ancient times. Yet, what those early thinkers were trying to bring to expression is still critical to our understanding of God and the Divine-human relationship. And stripped of its philosophical terminology and mode of thought, what the early Church was trying to say is quite simple. It is that God is the Absolute, Ultimate Mystery, the ground and source of all that is. God is beyond our knowing, beyond our capacity to know. God is Mystery, not as we speak of a mystery that baffles us, that we are

working on, and expect someday to solve, to explain. God is Mystery in the sense that we cannot comprehend the being of God.

The older theology spoke of God's incomprehensibility. But we speak of God. How can that be?

We speak of God because God reveals God's self in our human flesh; indeed, God identifies with our humanity. We see, we hear, we touch the Word made flesh. To use our Lenten language, God is mirrored in a human face. That is the Christian claim. Something can be known of the nature and character of the ultimate Mystery of God because it has come to expression in the human.

The Christian idea of the Trinity goes one step further; it claims that that ultimate Mystery whose nature and character are expressed in a human life is really the life of all that is - that the whole of reality is in-spirited with God. Nothing exists but the life, the breath of God.

All of that is not so difficult; in fact, it is quite obvious – The Ultimate Mystery-God must hold all things in being, must be pervasively present in all things, the Source, the energy, the creative center, moving the whole along the emerging, the unfolding of the bio-historical, evolutionary process, thus God's Spirit - the wind, the breath that is enlivening.

And the Ultimate Mystery, if it would be known, must show itself - communicate its nature and intention. Thus, the intention or idea of the Mystery "lands," so to speak, in history, takes on flesh, shows itself and so it is the claim of the Christian revelation that the character and nature and intention of God can be read off the face of Jesus Christ - flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone.

That is what the Christian religion claims. That is, Christian theology, or doctrine, or dogma is an attempt to articulate the experience that grounded and founded the Christian movement.

We are thinking animals; we want to understand our experience and so we reflect and we do our best to put experience in word and concepts. Those words and concepts are not the experience; they are a step or more removed from the experience –

To understand the doctrine of the Trinity is not the same as having the experience of God.

Yet, the concept arises out of experience. Look at I John 4:7-16. The letter begins,

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.

Now remember this is John or the community of John, the Gospel of which begins,

In the beginning was the word ...

Which calls to mind immediately Genesis 1:1,

In the beginning God ...

Now, is that accidental or is this writer intentionally connecting what he is writing about with the word made flesh that emerged from the Creator of all? And what is he trying to say?

Well, among other things, in the lesson I read from the fourth chapter, he is calling those to whom he writes to love one another. Why?

Because God is love.

How does he know? Because he believes Jesus Christ was a revelation of the character and nature of God. And this writer claims that one can know the love of God by loving another; in the love of one person for another is experienced the love of God.

God is love.

If we love one another, God lives in us ...

How do we know?

By this we know that we abide in God and God abides in us because God has given us his Spirit.

Again:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

This is my point: the raw material of the Trinity which is a theological construct lies in experience, the concrete experience of that early Christian community. The theological formulation of the Trinity is sometimes criticized because it is not in the Bible. Well, the term is not, but the experience that grounds the concept that points back to the experience is in the Bible.

One more illustration - Peter at the house of Cornelius. We come back to this passage often because it is a paradigmatic story from the early Church. Cornelius is a God-fearing Gentile, a Roman officer. He prays and has a vision in which he is instructed to send for Peter. Peter has a vision to prepare him for this call.

Peter goes to Cornelius' house, contrary to his religious training and conditioning, and says, "Why did you send for me?"

Cornelius responds by asking that Peter tell them what the Lord has commanded him to say.

Peter tells the story of Jesus - quite amazed that all this could be happening.

I truly understand that God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Can that be you speaking, Peter? And what does he say?

The message ... how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power ...

There it is again - God, Jesus, Spirit.

And before Peter was through preaching, the Spirit *fell on all who heard ...* The experience demanded a modification in the construct of God for Peter. Now, this is my point. *The idea of a Triune God or the Trinity is a theological construct - an intellectual articulation of an understanding which resulted from reflection on experience.* The doctrine of the Trinity was not thought up by some ancient Christian or church council to confound and mystify the faithful forever. Rather, a community of folk gathered around Jesus of Nazareth had this experience.

Paul knocked off his horse; Peter had a vision; James had an appearance of the brother he couldn't countenance, present to him after he was crucified. What can they make of it? Jews all, they believe God is One - but did they not experience the Holy, the Sacred, indeed, God - when they were with Jesus? And now that he is no longer in the flesh, having been crucified, dead and buried, do not their hearts burn within them yet - his Spirit is a living presence with them. How does one express what one experiences?

Words, concepts.

But, they are inadequate; in fact, they distort; they becloud as much as enlighten. What now; must I believe in the Trinity? No, of course not. It is a human conceptual scheme that points beyond itself to the Ultimate Mystery whose nature and character can be read off from the life of Jesus whose spirit is the Spirit of God which is God's pervasive presence in all that is.

What do I have to believe?

Nothing. God is not about our believing something. God is to be trusted, experienced, rested in. This is where we've done such a poor job in the Church,

insisting on right belief, as though we know, as though our ideas correspond to reality, to the Mystery that is God. Right belief - that is orthodoxy. The philosopher Santayana said,

Orthodoxy sanctions and supports the natural man while remaining open and congenial to the possibility of his spiritual development.

Do you "hear" that? Orthodoxy - careful doctrinal delineation - that has a place, just as the early Church attempted to bring some order and structure to its experience. But, our finest articulations of the experience of God are but crooked fingers pointing beyond word and concepts.

Think of all the words I've used to point to the limited usefulness of words and concepts. Of course, we desire to understand, but even more, we must understand that we cannot understand - Then we will perhaps be silent; then we will perhaps learn to wait on the Lord. Then in the silence, we may see, as I did this morning, a silver moon hang over a glassy sea, creating a path of light - or see the sun rise and hear a cardinal sing a celebration of the dawn, and simply be still, and know that God is God, and all is well.

Then we will understand that, in the moments of silence that follow my speaking, there is more possibility of experiencing the presence of the Holy than in all the chattering of my voice.