

Pentecost 1 / Holy Trinity / May 26, 2024

Isaiah 6:3

“Above Him stood the seraphim...And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.’”

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts

On the Sunday of the Holy Trinity, we celebrate the majesty of God in His divine being revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; one God in three persons, three persons in one God. It is impossible to comprehend God in the majesty of His divine being. We cannot comprehend the majesty of the universe. How much less can we comprehend the majesty of Him who called it into being, upholds it by the power of His word, surrounds and pervades it by His Spirit. God reveals Himself majestically in the creation. When we look at the creation, from the most distant galaxies to the tiniest simple celled creatures in the ocean’s depths, we are looking at the expression of the divine being. God is unfathomable in His creation. He is incomprehensible in the nature of His being.

On Trinity Sunday we note in particular God’s being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; one divine essence in three persons. We speak the Trinitarian Creed, bewildering as it is, “not confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.” The Athanasian Creed is bewildering. God in the essence of His being should bewilder us. He is far above our comprehension and beyond our control. Ancient peoples tried to control and contain their gods. They created gods in their own image. They sought to access their power for their benefit. They sought to appease their anger and keep them at a manageable distance. Not too close for comfort. Close enough to help when needed. We still make gods in our own image. We want to control the forces of nature and contain the universe in our understanding. We cannot contain God or control Him with our understanding.

God reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit not in nature, but in the revelation of Holy Scripture. God reveals Himself as one divine essence in three persons, not so we would understand His being, but so we would understand He is beyond our understanding and especially beyond our power to control. God reveals His divine nature most incomprehensibly in His love. Love is beyond the power of human reason. Love is beyond our control. God’s love is even beyond that. We love those who are in some way loveable. God loves the unlovable. In the letter to the Romans St. Paul wrote, “God demonstrates His own love in this: when we were sinners, Christ died for us.” God’s love is that despite human sin, rebellion and even the denial of His existence, that He cares for us. More than that, He gave Himself to share in the limits of our humanity by joining His divinity to our humanity in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Even beyond joining His divinity to our humanity, He gave His sinless Son to suffer and die on the cross to pay the debt of our sin, that we would know Him in love as our God and Saviour. More incomprehensible than His being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; One God in three persons, is His love for us in Christ our Saviour.

Isaiah the prophet was what we would call a ‘holy man.’ He was a prophet who received the word of the Lord, so that he would speak in the Lord’s name. Isaiah spoke, but it was the Lord who was speaking. Isaiah was also a priest of the Lord, offering sacrifices in His temple. As a priest he was set apart to offer sacrifices of atonement for the sins of the people. As a priest he was set apart to enter into parts of the temple that few others could access. More than this, Isaiah was holy in comparison with the sins of many of his contemporaries. Yet despite his personal piety, Isaiah expresses a profound sense of his sin and sinfulness. While serving in the temple he is caught up in the Spirit and brought into the Lord’s heavenly temple. In the presence of the holy God who fills all things and surrounds the universe, he cried out “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” In the presence of God’s absolute holiness, we see our sin and sense our sinfulness.

The angels that circled the throne sang a triune verse, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts.” What is God’s holiness? God’s holiness is the essence of His being; pure goodness, virtue and righteousness. Nothing unholy can abide in His presence. His holiness consumes the unholy as fire consumes dry grass. That’s why in Leviticus fires break out in the camp when Israel sins. God’s holiness consumes everything that is not holy. Physicists speak of matter and anti-matter. The two are so opposite that if ever they come in contact, they devour each other. Nothing devours God’s holiness. His holiness consumes everything sinful, including sinful people like Isaiah, you and I. Israel was preserved in the wilderness through the sacrifices of the tabernacle, by which God covered

their sin in the shield of His holiness. Isaiah was preserved in the presence of God by a coal from the altar through which God atoned for his sin and covered His sinfulness.

We have the illusion or delusion that we enter into and can stand in the presence of God, because of our goodness and the good things we have done. Few had done more good things than Isaiah, yet he realized that even he was lost. God is so different than us in the nature of His being that we cannot begin to comprehend. We have more luck contemplating what is on the other side of the universe, than of understanding the nature of God's being, especially His holiness. God must bring us into His presence, even as He brought Isaiah into His presence. God must atone for our sin and cover us with His righteousness as a shield, even as He did for Isaiah. He did this for the world through the sacrifice of Jesus His Son, by which He atoned for the sin of every human soul. He gives the atonement of sin to each one of us, through faith in Jesus and baptism into His death and resurrection.

God is so far above us by nature and so beyond our understanding that we can hardly begin to understand that we can't understand. We can reach up, but we can never come close to Him by our own efforts. As Isaiah said in another place, "Your sins have separated you from your God." Nevertheless, God loves us and wants us to know Him. He reaches down to us through His Spirit in the words of prophets and evangelists. He reaches out to us through His word, by which His Spirit opens our hearts to believe and our minds to begin to understand the wonders of His love. He came down to us in Jesus His eternal Son, through whom He joined Himself to our humanity. That's even more incomprehensible than One God in three persons. More than this, Jesus took our sins and sinfulness upon Himself on the cross and offered His perfect righteousness and sinless obedience in place of our sin and disobedience. God accepted the perfection of His life in our place and the sacrifice of His death for our sins. In Him we receive the righteousness of God in forgiveness. In baptism we are covered with His holiness as a shield, so we may abide in God's presence now through faith and one day fully in His resurrection to life everlasting. Then we will see Him as He is and know Him as our God and Saviour: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Each year on Trinity Sunday, we speak the Athanasian Creed, which expresses the necessity of believing the catholic faith to be saved. The catholic or universal Christian faith, is that we are saved by God's grace received through faith in Christ Jesus. The Christian faith also teaches that God's judgement is rendered according to a person's works, which are the expression of faith or the lack thereof. The creed says, "those who have done good will enter eternal life and those who have done evil into eternal fire." This is not a contradiction of the teaching of justification by grace received through faith in Christ Jesus. Jesus Himself said, "By their fruits you will know them."

Our fruits do not save us. Our fruits show that we have been saved. The fruits themselves are the result of God's Spirit working within us, planting the seed of faith, giving it growth and expression in good works. God makes us righteous in Christ our Saviour. God displays His righteousness in us by the righteous acts He does through us. By grace we are saved through faith in Christ Jesus. Even as He saves us by His grace, He judges us righteous in His sight by the good works He does through us. As St. Paul wrote "Who has known the mind of the Lord or been His counsellor...for from Him and to Him are all things." On the Sunday of the Holy Trinity as we contemplate God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we give Him thanks and praise Him especially for the wonder of His love in Christ our Saviour. In His Name. Amen