

### ***They Worshipped Him***

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: The Festival of Holy Trinity that we celebrate today is unique among the Church's high holy days. On most of them we celebrate an important event in the life of Jesus our Savior: his birth, his baptism, his transfiguration, his resurrection from the dead. On Holy Trinity, we commemorate the triumph of a critically important teaching or doctrine of the Church, a teaching that addresses the question of exactly who Jesus is.

Our adversary, the devil, is a wickedly clever guy. His game is deception. And his attacks on the Church are relentless. This is because he knows that people are saved by believing the truth about Jesus. So, if he can sufficiently twist or distort the truth about Jesus, what we'll end up is a caricature of a Savior who has no power to save. It'll be something that looks sort of like Christianity and even calls itself that but, isn't.

The devil's first big swing at it came early on, already in the first century while some of the Apostles were still living. The distortion of the truth was called Gnosticism. It presented a version of Jesus who was truly divine, the Son of God; but it denied that he actually took on human flesh and blood. So, the Jesus of the Gnostics is true God, yes; but not true man. The thought behind it is that things physical are inherently inferior to things spiritual, and there's no way in the world that the true God would ever lower himself to being united with such a vile thing as a physical human body that sweats and gets dirty and needs to eat and drink and ... well, take care of other bodily functions. Gnosticism taught that in his earthly ministry Jesus *only appeared* to be human. What seemed to be his body was like a projection on a screen or a hologram, no substance to it. And it's worth noting that the people who followed Gnosticism thought they were doing Jesus a great big favor by keeping him away from things physical. They thought they were doing more to honor God than other Christians who, from their point of view, degraded him by believing that the pure divine actually entered into icky humanity. Ewww!

The big problem with Gnosticism though, apart from it flatly contradicting Holy Scripture, is that if Jesus only looks like he has a human body, then on the cross it only looks like he suffers and dies for the sins of the world. No true atonement takes place there. Oh, and it only looks like he rises from the dead. So there's no resurrection either. No incarnation, no atonement, no resurrection: that's a version of "Christianity" in which there is no salvation. The Church was right to reject Gnosticism and to reveal it for the soul-destroying heresy that it is.

But Satan doesn't give up easily. His next major assault on the teachings of the Church took place in the third century in what were called the Trinitarian Controversies. At the very heart of these controversies were questions about the *divinity* of Jesus. There were some who came to be known as Arians (after Arius, one of their more outspoken leaders) who claimed that there was a time before the world began when God the Father existed alone. At some point he then created the Son, who is a separate and inferior being – not one with the Father and not truly God in the same sense that the Father is. It's this "Son of God", this inferior created being that took on human flesh and blood and died on the cross.

And again, the Arians meant well. They were trying to uphold and preserve the honor, uniqueness, and absolute holiness of God the Father. They had good intentions; but as they say, good intentions are what pave the road to hell. This is a case in point. What makes the atonement that Jesus offered on the cross for the sins of the world complete and universal so that it covers all people is the fact that when Jesus died, God died. No mere creature's death could accomplish the salvation of fallen humankind. Also, if Jesus is not truly God who is one

with the Father, it drastically diminishes the love the Father shows for the world in offering up his Son. It's more like, "Oh, the world needs a Savior. Here, I'll whip one up for you: [Snap] Done!" It doesn't cost the Father anything. So, the Arians give us a Jesus who can't save us and a Father who doesn't love us. No thanks. We'd rather have the real Jesus who is revealed to us in Sacred Scripture: the Jesus who is true and fully God, and true and fully man.

That brings us to today's Scripture readings, all three of which reveal either the true divinity of the Son, the true humanity of the Son, or both. In the Genesis text, the Son appears as the Word of God through whom all things are created. Recall that St. John tells us that this Word by which the world was made and who is its light became flesh and made his dwelling among us. In the reading from Acts, the Apostle Peter tells his startled hearers that this Jesus whom they crucified is both Lord and Christ. That's Lord as in Yahweh, the Lord God; and Christ as in the anointed One, the Savior and Son of David. In other words: true God and true man.

But coming to that conclusion was not easy even for the Apostles. That's what the text from St. Matthew reveals. It's worth noting that in his Gospel, Matthew gives us very little about the post resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples in Jerusalem. Jesus does appear to them briefly, but the main thrust is getting the disciples to go to Galilee where Jesus promises to meet with them more extensively.

So they go to the designated rendezvous: a particular mountain Jesus had indicated. Who knows? Maybe it was the same one on which he taught the Sermon on the Mount. It doesn't matter. Anyway, when they get there, Jesus shows up like he said he would. And we read, "When they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted." And we ought to ask, "Wait a minute. *What* did they doubt?" That is was really Jesus? That doesn't make sense. They followed the guy for three years. They knew that he'd risen from the dead. There can't be any question in their minds about his *identity*. Okay, so then what did they doubt?

It was the *worship* thing. Look, these guys are good and faithful Jews; have been all their lives. They know that worship is directed to God alone; anything else is idolatry. And God, you know, he's a spiritual being. He's everywhere present, yes, but his earthly presence abides in the Temple in Jerusalem. *That's* where we go to worship God.

And here they are in Galilee with Jesus. Very human Jesus. They followed him from town to town when he was teaching. They walked dusty roads with him, ate with him, saw him wash and sleep and do all the things that people do. They know him to be a man of flesh and blood. And again, put yourself in the Jewish mindset. They're wondering if it's okay to direct the worship due to God alone to this man, Jesus. It's got to feel really weird to them – like maybe they're doing something wrong.

It's helpful to know too that the word translated "doubt" in the text, has as its primary meaning "to hesitate". And I think that better captures their mood. They *want* to worship him, they think they should; but they're just not sure it's right.

Knowing this, Jesus comes to their rescue. He draws close to them and says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He couldn't have said it any plainer. There is only one supreme authority over heaven and earth, and that's the Lord God Almighty, the King of all Creation. Jesus is saying, "That's me." So, there's no reason to hesitate or hold back their worship. And some may think it too fine a point, but this raises an important theological question that we need to address. Is worship due to Jesus only on account of his divinity (his being God), or is it right to worship Jesus also according to his humanity (his being a man)? If you're not sure, or if you're initial inclination is to say it's only the divinity in Jesus that

is worthy of worship, then you're grappling with exactly the same hesitation the disciples were dealing with.

So, let me make this clear: What we celebrate at Ascension is the exaltation of Christ's human nature. It is the *Son of Man* who is received into glory and given authority over all things by the Father. So, it's right and proper to worship Jesus according to both his divinity *and* his humanity. Besides, you really can't separate the two. It's the *person* of Jesus who is worthy of worship. And the person of Jesus is true God and true man.

All right, returning to the text, in view of the fact that Jesus has been given all authority and is King over all, he continues, "As you are going, make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We recognize this as what's called the Great Commission; but that's a bit of a misnomer. Jesus could have stated this as a command, and that's the way we heard the text read earlier; but the way you heard me say it just now is more accurate. It's not "go", it's "as you are going"; that is to say, as you are conducting your day to day business wherever that takes you. As you are doing that, "make disciples of all nations." And this follows from what he's just said. All authority is his. He is King over all; believers and unbelievers alike. The trouble is that unbelievers don't know it and are not benefiting from it. So, let's fix that. Let's rescue them from their ignorance and state of rebellion, and move them into the truth and benefit of being citizens of Christ's kingdom.

How do we do that? He tells us: by baptizing and teaching. Specifically, we are to baptize them "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". And please note that's one name, not three. The Triune God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit "neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance". In baptism the Triune God places his name on you. He makes you one of his own. He unites you with Jesus in his death and resurrection, washes away your sin, he gives you spiritual rebirth, and places upon you his own Holy Spirit. That's the door into his kingdom.

And then continued teaching is what keeps you there. A disciple is, after all, someone who is being taught. What are you to be taught? To "observe all that [Jesus] commanded." There you go. Has anyone here yet mastered all that Jesus commanded? No? I guess that makes us all works in progress. Thus, the baptizing and the teaching must go on.

As we do, we cling to Jesus' promise "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age". On the surface, this promise to be with us might seem to be an indication of his omnipresence – the fact that as God, he is everywhere present throughout his creation. And while that's true, he prefaces the promise with the word "behold", which means "look" or "see". So, Jesus doesn't mean that he promises to be with us in some vague, fuzzy, spiritual sense; but rather in a way that can be seen and experienced.

How's that? Just like he said: baptize, teach, and I am with you. It's specifically *in* the baptizing and teaching of all things he commanded that we see and experience his presence with us. Jesus is in the water of Holy Baptism. We hear his voice when his Word is read and taught. And one of the things he taught was to see and to receive him as he comes to us in his body and blood of the Lord's Supper. In these ways his promise to be with us is fulfilled. In these ways we see him, and we will to the end of the age.

When the disciples saw Jesus, they worshipped him. Seeing him, may we too worship him, true God and true man, now and always, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***