

Glory Be ...!

In the name of him who is exalted at the right hand of God, dear friends in Christ: You are very familiar with the liturgical phrase we call the *Gloria Patri*. It goes: “*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.*” It’s an ascription of praise to our Triune God that shows up repeatedly in our worship services. We say it after every psalm and sing it in the post-communion canticle called the *Nunc Dimittus*, which means we repeat it at least twice each week. And on those Sundays we use the order of Matins or Morning Prayer (like today) we recite it at least three times in the course of the service. So we say it a lot. The funny thing is that unlike almost all of the other things we say during a worship service, this particular phrase is not lifted directly from the Scripture. You won’t find it in your Bible. So, what’s up with that? If it isn’t even a biblical expression, why do we repeat it so often?

Perhaps you never thought about it; or maybe you figured it’s just one of those churchly sounding phrases that people who write orders of worship use to pad the service to make it last longer. Actually, there’s a lot more to it than that. The use of this phrase has its roots in the very earliest Christian worship services. Think back to the time of the Apostles and the mission work done by St. Paul and others which is recorded for us in the book of Acts. Back then most Christian congregations sprang from existing Jewish synagogues. Somebody like Paul would show up for their Sabbath service and he’d ask for permission to speak. He’d use the opportunity to teach about Jesus and explain how he was the promised Messiah they were waiting for. Typically what would happen is that some folks would hear the Gospel and believe in Jesus and others wouldn’t – so you’d end up with a division in the house—usually an angry and bitter division. Then the new Christians would be expelled from their local synagogue and they’d meet for worship someplace else. But the only way they knew how to worship was the way they always had, which is pretty much like we do still today: hymns, psalms, readings, sermon, prayers, and so on.

So imagine that you’re a visitor to a city in the first century where there’s a traditional Jewish synagogue and a now a new Christian congregation. The worship service in both places would look pretty much the same. Same psalms, same readings, same hymns – the biggest difference would be in the sermon. At one place they’d be talking about the Messiah still expected to come and at the other the preacher would be explaining how the Scriptures and messianic promises are all fulfilled by Jesus. This could lead to a lot of confusion (especially since many people use the time for the sermon to catch up on their sleep – or they go into what I call “sermon listening mode” [blank expression, mouth open, eyes glazed over, etc.]). So that was one problem: no easily discernible difference between Jewish and Christian worship services. The other problem was that it really irked traditional Jews that Christians were using the same psalms and Scriptures they were. “They belong to us”, they thought. “You have no right to use them.” As a result, the early Christians found it necessary to clearly distinguish themselves from the traditional Jews who refused to recognize Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, and at the same time they wanted to claim the Scriptures as their own. In their minds (and they were correct in this) the psalms and books of the Old Testament were Christian writings. In truth, only believers in Jesus, people who have been illumined by the Holy Spirit and who trust in Jesus as their Savior, can properly understand the Scriptures. So, as a way to express these things, to distinguish themselves from traditional Jews *and* claim the Scriptures as their own, whenever a psalm was recited or the Scriptures were read the Christians would conclude it with

an expression of praise to the Triune God. So the use of the *Gloria Patri* was in part praise to God, but it also was a creedal statement confessing Jesus, God's Son, as the Christ

But the Gloria they used at first was different than the one we use today. Initially it went: "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen" – which simply means that the three persons of the Trinity are praised forever. What was missing was the second line that says "as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever". That was added in the 300s as a result of the Arian controversy. After more than two hundred years of the Christian Church, no one was confusing Jews and Christians any more. The lines between the two had been clearly drawn. But there was a problem within the Christian Church between true believers and the followers of a false teacher named Arius. If you think that religious controversy and division within the Church is something that only happened after the Reformation, you need to brush up on history.

Arius was an influential bishop in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a bright and popular guy. He was also a flaming heretic. He thought the concept of the Trinity (one God in three persons) is just too hard to understand – and if he couldn't understand it he reasoned it simply couldn't be right. (He was also a very humble fellow.) So he concocted a philosophy that denied the Trinity. He said there's the one God we call the Father, and he's the only God there is. What the Scriptures *call* God's Son, is a created being; more like a super angel. This created super angel then comes to earth, takes flesh as the man Jesus, and lives and dies and rises again. Then, after his ascension into heaven, *this* Jesus is promoted to a sort of junior godhood – but he's not truly God in the same sense as the Father. When the Scriptures call Jesus *God*, Arius said, we are to understand it as an honorary title. It's like we should use a capital G when referring to God the Father and a lower case g when talking about "god" the Son. When he got to Holy Spirit, Arius decided to get rid of him altogether. The Holy Spirit, he said, is not a *person* of the Trinity nor is he God. Arius said the Spirit is the impersonal force or the energy by which God accomplishes his will. To him the Holy Spirit was kind of like electricity: it does stuff; but you can't see it and you certainly can't talk to it – there's nobody home, no conscious identity.

Now, maybe you're wondering what difference it makes how somebody thinks about the Trinity. It's a complicated idea that isn't clearly spelled out for us in any one place in the Scripture. You have to pull together passages from all over the Bible to derive the Church's doctrine concerning the Trinity. Since that's the case, so what if someone gets it mixed up? Does it make a difference? Is it worth arguing about? Is it worth dividing the Church over? A lot of people were asking these same questions in the fourth century. They just wanted everyone to get along.

Fortunately for us, there were also some very committed Christian theologians who understood what was at stake. Two things in particular leapt out at them: first, and most obviously, in order to hold the views of Arius, you had to throw out certain very clear passages of Scripture that say Jesus really is God (like we heard in today's readings). You must also throw out the passages that say the Holy Spirit is an individual, separate person of the Godhead who thinks and acts and has feelings of his own. Arius allowed his human reason to override the Word of God – and that's always a dangerous thing to do. Once you start down that path, where do you stop? If you can throw out *some* of the Bible, what's to stop you from throwing out *any* part that you find difficult or offensive or that doesn't suit you? No, the reason we hold the orthodox view of the Trinity that we do, as complicated as it is, is precisely because we hold God's Word to be true even when it doesn't make sense to us. We allow for the fact that God is a being who surpasses our powers of comprehension. We are willing to admit that God is a whole lot bigger and smarter than we are.

But secondly, and of primary importance, the teaching of Arius casts a shadow of doubt on the Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus. You see, if Jesus is just some created being when he suffers and dies on the cross and not truly God, then the atonement he made for sin must necessarily be limited in some sense. If it's not God with a capital G who dies for sin, then you can never be sure that the whole price is paid – and if that's the case, how can you be sure that your sins are covered? Arius' view also diminishes God's love for us. If you hold to what he taught, then God didn't love you so that he gave his only-begotten Son to death on a cross. Instead, he simply whipped up an elaborate sacrificial lamb to do the job. The cost to him was minimal. It's the difference between a father offering his own flesh and blood son and surrendering one of the livestock. The orthodox theologians of the fourth century correctly saw that Arius' view undermined the heart of the Gospel. It had to be rejected.

They also knew they had to cleanse the Church of the Arian heresy. And just so that we understand it, this wasn't a case of the big bad Church picking on the little guy. In many places the supporters of Arius were in the majority, and in those places faithful pastors and teachers were persecuted mercilessly.

So, with the Christian Church threatening to fragment into pieces, the bishops in various places decided to get together and hash out the biblical doctrine of the Trinity once and for all. They met in A.D. 325 at Nicaea, a Greek city in what is Turkey today. Both sides presented their positions. They listened and debated. They searched the Scriptures for answers, and then they listened and debated some more. At times the arguments got pretty heated. It's reported that at one point the bishop of Myra, a fellow named Nicholas (the same guy we know better as "Jolly ol' St. Nick") became so exasperated with Arius and his weasel way of arguing that he walked up to him and slapped him upside the head. The council did not approve of his use of violence. Nicholas was almost removed from his office; but he apologized profusely and was forgiven. I suspect that part of the reason he was forgiven so easily is that he wasn't the only bishop present who felt that the only way to get some sense into Arius was to beat it into him.

Okay, the result of all this discussion was that the vast majority of the church leaders at Nicaea were able to formulate and agree to a single statement that presented the correct and biblical doctrine of the Trinity *and* of the person and work of Jesus Christ. We call this statement, not surprisingly, the Nicene Creed, which we together with the whole Christian Church on earth continue to confess today. It clearly distinguishes the three persons of the Trinity, keeping them separate, and yet calling each one God while at the same time affirming that there is only one God. And, like today's three Scripture readings, over and against the teachings of Arius, it stresses the fact that Jesus Christ is true God. That's what it means when we say he is "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father". It's the same thing we said this morning in the Athanasian Creed when we said: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at the same time both God and man. He is God, begotten of the substance of the Father before all ages; and he is man, born of the substance of his mother in this age. Perfect God and perfect man ..."

Not everyone was happy with the orthodox consensus. Arius and his followers went underground, so to speak, and continued to hold and to spread their false views. And so, as sort of a way to exclude the Arian heresy and to prevent it from infecting the Church all over again, they added to the Gloria Patri that line that says, "*As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.*" Understand the unchanging "it" in that statement is the Holy Trinity. By including the line whenever a psalm or Scripture was read, the congregation would respond by

praising the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are all equally worthy of glory, and who always have been and always will be who and what they are: the three distinct persons of the one Holy Trinity—which is the opposite of what Arius taught. So, just as the phrase had once distinguished Christians from Jews, it now distinguishes true believers from anti-Trinitarian heretics.

In conclusion, today, Holy Trinity Sunday, we celebrate a major victory in the constant war to preserve God's truth against the steady attempts of Satan to lead us astray – and thereby shake our confidence in the salvation won for us by the Lord Jesus. We mark too how God keeps the Church in the one true faith not by avoiding conflict; but rather by confronting it head on and directing his servants to dig deeply into his Word through which the Holy Spirit is able to enlighten us and lead us into all truth. So may the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us continue to keep us in this one true faith as we continue to give him all honor and praise as we confess together, *“Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.”*

Soli Deo Gloria!