

## **‘God as Trinity’ – Exploring the God of the Fathers**

In her hauntingly beautiful song, *Both Sides, Now*, Joni Mitchell talks about love and life as a baffling and heartbreaking illusion. Caught between idealistic and cynical understandings of ‘ice cream castles in the air,’ and ‘clouds getting in the way,’ she looks at both sides, only to conclude, ‘it’s love’s illusions that I recall, I really don’t know love at all.’

Sometimes we encounter ourselves and our world only as this bewildering and baffling mystery, a mystery that stands against us to confront and confound. This is to encounter mystery as something that assails us as an enemy, something we cannot control and can never know. Such anxiety is prevalent in our society today as we face rampant viruses that threaten our health and wellbeing, as we face a world beyond our shores as alien and dangerous, as our economic and societal wellbeing feels like it is coming undone. Who we are and what our world is feels like a dark and foreboding mystery: hostile and unobtainable, irrational and fearful, overwhelming and dangerous.

But when our Christian tradition speaks of mystery, it is speaking of something else entirely. Not a mystery that is dark and foreboding, not a mystery that seeks to knock us off course or shatter our trust, but the deep mystery of divine love. Our early Church tradition speaks of the mystery of God as analogous to the mystery of our own person: not a mystery that confounds so much, but a many layered mystery, in which there is always something more to explore, something more to discover, something more to learn, something more to encounter. This is true of all our human relationships: the more we know about a person, the more their reality and mystery opens itself out to us. Theologians often speak of this as a ‘saturated phenomenon,’ something that escapes our ability to enclose or understand, but not because it is threatening or dangerous, but because the depth of its reality is so abundant, so deep. It is a reality that speaks of what is beyond itself.

So far in our sermon series on ‘The God who is,’ we have heard of the God who is made known through our Scriptures: the God who calls creation into being, who calls a

people to himself, and who calls us through the life and person of Jesus Christ. This is a God who is radically at work in his world, a God calling things into being that did not exist, and calling a people into freedom and life when they were lost in darkness and death. And then last week, we heard of the God of the Philosophers, the one who reveals himself to those who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of wisdom, a God who calls us into a deep sense of wonder and awe, a God who calls out to us from the depths of our being, from the heart of creation itself.

Today we are exploring the God of the Fathers, that early church tradition that took the Scriptural witness of Old and New Testaments and threaded it together with the philosophical traditions of the ancient world in order to generate the greatest and most creative imaginative and religious synthesis the world has ever known. This imaginative world has been bequeathed to us as its heirs. It means that as Christians we need to both hear and respond to the challenge of Scripture, a word that comes to us from beyond, a word that doesn't simply conform to our categories and structures, but challenges and subverts them; but that also we need to be a people who think deeply about faith, to be those who exercise our minds and our rationality to think through what we believe, to question, to explore, to experiment and to discover.

So often in our contemporary churches we think of theologians as the experts, those who belong to the professional academy, those with a specialised understanding and knowledge. But for the early church tradition, this was very different. It was the desert monk Evagrius who said, 'A theologian is one who prays, and the one who prays is a theologian.' None of the church fathers or mothers were solitary intellectuals, but rather each of them was immersed in the life and worship of the church. Each of them encountered the living God not as an abstract intellectual principle, but as the one who confronts them through Scripture and calls to them through the liturgy. This means that each of us is a theologian when we encounter the living God through prayer and liturgy, worship and praise, Scripture and sacrament. There's no need to leave it to the

professionals, we can all have something to say, something to believe. We get to know God not just through the reading of books, but in the act of worship.

It was this immersion in worship that led the early church fathers and mothers to come to a radically new understanding of God. Their experience of God through worship and through their encounter with Jesus Christ in word and sacrament utterly transformed their philosophical understanding of God. As they worked on the Creed together, they came up with this explosive notion: 'We believe in One God, the Father, almighty, maker of heaven and earth.' God the creator of heaven and earth, utterly transcendent, utterly distinct and distant, was now and forever to be known as 'Father.' It was his relationship with the Son that was now to define the very essence of God. As Ben Myers tells us, 'In the creed we confess the three great movements of God's power: God lovingly brought the world into being; God lovingly entered the womb and became part of the world in Jesus Christ; and God the Holy Spirit is lovingly transfiguring the world in the lives of the saints. This is the Trinitarian God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not a distant monad in the sky, but a dynamic and relational reality that shapes and enfolds all things.

So, the early church fathers and mothers came to realise they encountered the fulness of God in liturgy and worship, they came to understand that God was to be known in the dynamics of relationship as Trinity, and finally, they came to realise that truth was eschatological. What does this mean? So often we look to the truth of things in the past: we remember some golden age: when things made sense, when things were simpler, when we were at home in a less complicated and easier world. So often the church seems to encourage such a view. But, says church tradition, truth is not behind us, but in front of us, and God doesn't call to us from the past, but out into the future. As John Behr tells us, 'the content of orthodoxy is not protological by eschatological.'

This means that as Christians we have some work to do. The world we encounter in worship, and the God we hear in Scripture, is not yet evident in our world. We still live with the fear of death and have to face anxiety and uncertainty. But, as our creeds tell us,

'we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.' With the vision of God before us, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, active in our world to create, transform and redeem, we can be those who begin to reshape our world in faith, hope and love. The despairing narratives that are all around us will not be, cannot be, the final word. It is Irenaeus, one of the most creative and energetic thinkers of the second century, that said that at the end of all things Christians will be so full of life that they will simply 'forget to die.' I wonder what it would mean to live into such a vision today?