

**The Collect**            ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us stedfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. Amen.

**For the Epistle Rev 4:1-11**        AFTER this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be here after. And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts\* full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts\* had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

## **The Gospel. St. John 3:1-15**

THERE was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whoso ever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

## *The Idea of the Trinity*

Today I want to speak of the traditional teaching of the Trinity. Tradition is our spiritual ancestors teaching us what they think about the New Testament. Ultimately, we must all make up our own minds about what the New Testament is saying to us. But we would be foolish to try to understand the NT without considering the witness of the historic Christian Church. The Church does not fear this process. It encourages this process. Because the Church knows that the same spirit that dwells in each of us and is revealing the truth to each of us, is the same spirit which has formed the Church through the ages and has delivered the traditions of orthodoxy to us – from father and mother – to daughter and son – since the time of Christ.

The New Testament does not teach us about the Trinity. There is no word for Trinity in the New Testament. What it does do is to teach us about the divinity of Jesus Christ. And in muted terms about the personhood and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. And the way that it does this is not by laying out articles of belief dogmatically and then saying ‘there it is, believe this or perish.’

No. It presents the life and work of Jesus Christ, and encourages us to draw all these things together and come to our own conclusion. Now make no mistake about this. All the authors are categorical in their own belief that Jesus is the only begotten son of God, eternal in the heavens; nevertheless, they believe that it is their duty to present the facts – the data – and you must decide.

So let's go back, briefly, to the witness of the apostles and remind ourselves of some of the things that they actually do say about the person of Jesus Christ. Here again, the Apostolic witness is not presented in any systematized way in the Gospels. We are given short introductions in the Synoptic Gospels that the infant Jesus is a most amazing child with a most amazing destiny. But so was Julius Caesar. So was Hannabal. So was Alexander the Great.

But as we walk through the Gospel, we are immediately confronted with a witness about Christ that is far beyond any of the great heroes of history. For example, early on in Matthew we find Jesus *forgiving sins* – against God – and of course, the Jews properly take this as complete and utter blasphemy. Jesus says that of all men who have ever lived, only he has seen and known the Father. What a stupendous statement this is! And that unless men put him before every earthly affection – as far above them as love is above hate –

and followed him to the death, they were disqualified as true disciples. In any other monotheism or polytheism – this is complete and utter idolatry! If any other great hero of history or any religious prophet had made claims like this, he would be immediately dismissed as a psychopath or a mad-man.

Jesus claimed that *all power was given to him*. It's no wonder they wanted to stone him! St. John is even more direct in presenting a strong argument for Jesus' deity in his Gospel, including many "I am" statements made by Jesus that are appropriate only to God. In ordinary speech John (and Paul) reverses the order (εἰμι ἐγώ) And here again, I want you to be thinking about this: what if any other religious prophet or philosopher had said these things? Or this: has any religious prophet or philosopher said anything like this about himself?

- I am the bread of life, Jesus says.<sup>1</sup>
- I am the light of the world<sup>2</sup>
- I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.<sup>3</sup>
- Jesus says that men should honor him *as they honor the Father*.<sup>4</sup>

I want to present the witness of the Apostles like this because, I wanted to show you how the Church arrived at the idea of the Trinity. They were simply trying to express in very short form, what had been clearly presented in the NT about the deity of Christ. And I want you to imagine yourself a leader in the Church, or even in your family teaching your children this idea for the very first time. How would you reconcile the monotheism of Judaism, with the fact that the Apostles are clearly presenting Christ as God?

And this treatment of Jesus Christ is not only found in the Gospels, it is everywhere in the epistles of St. Paul. Paul says that “We shall all appear before the Judgment seat of Christ”!<sup>5</sup> And in his letter to the Colossian Church he says of Christ: “For by him were all things created ... all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.”<sup>6</sup>

To complete our journey through all the major authors of the NT, let us turn to John. In the Revelation of John, Jesus is specifically given titles and powers that have *only* been associated with God<sup>7</sup>:

- The alpha and the omega
- The beginning and the end
- The possessor of the keys of hell and death
- The Lamb taking vengeance upon the ungodly<sup>8</sup>

And if we had the time this morning we could do this same exercise concerning the Holy Spirit – that he is personal, that he is omni-present, omnipotent, omniscient. But since the Holy Spirit's ministry and his earnest desire is that Christ be glorified in all things. We will honor that desire and leave that study for another day.

The important point here is that the idea of the Trinity does not arise from the dogma of the Church. It arises from the testimony of the apostles themselves. It is not a clever theological argument that is based upon an unclear sentence here or there. The evidence that ascribes the full weight of deity to the Son and to the Holy Spirit is not a drop of rain here or there. It is a torrential downpour. And we have just put our hand briefly into this downpour this morning. And that's why the sons and daughters of the Church since the time of Christ have died to preserve the dogma of the Trinity. Because the dogma of the Trinity preserves the truth of the New Testament regarding God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. They are three persons, yet they are one God, as the Jewish *Shema* had said. Even Jesus repeats it in Mark: "Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord."<sup>9</sup>

And before we conclude this subject this morning, I want to remind you that every single significant doctrine that the Church commends to us is not an abstract theological idea. Every teaching that Christ has give us is the very spiritual food that we eat that sustains us. Another way of saying this is that we are what we believe. If what we believe is an incoherent mess, our lives will be an incoherent mess.

Let me give you a passing example. Both hyper-monotheism and permissive polytheism cannot adequately conform to *what is there* – not only theoretically but existentially. Because if we reject the solution to the Godhead that the New Testament presents and what our spiritual ancestors have confirmed to us about what they too have seen there, it will effect the whole basis and range of our life.

The monotheisms of the world – like Islam – and the polytheisms of the world, like Greek and Roman gods – will eventually produce a view of the individual and of society that will be destructive of itself – the rigid monotheism of Islam destroying itself in an absolute tyranny; the undisciplined polytheism or Greece destroying itself in agnostic debauchery.

The Trinity season, which begins today, is a long one. The major feasts of the Church year are over. During this season we learn about our relationship to the Triune God. I will try to place special emphasis on the testimony that the Scriptures have set forth about the Creator, the only begotten Son of God and the Holy Ghost. And I believe that as we think about the doctrine of Christ concerning the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, our relationship to him will deepen, our love for him will deepen, our worship of God will deepen and we ourselves will grow in the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we will grow in the knowledge and joy and love of God, and we will grow in the blessed and restful communion of the Holy Ghost. – *Amen*

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<sup>1</sup> Joh 6:35b

<sup>2</sup> Joh 8:12

<sup>3</sup> Joh 14:6

<sup>4</sup> Joh 5:23 “All men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.”

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this means nothing more than that the Apostles themselves will sit upon thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Paul says: 10 But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. (Rom 14:10) But then he quotes Isaiah for support: “For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” (Isa 45:23b) which makes Christ *the* judge at final judgment.

<sup>6</sup> Col 1:16-17

<sup>7</sup> Rev 1:9-18; Re 22: 12

<sup>8</sup> Ro 12:19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. “Hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand? (Re 6:16-17)

<sup>9</sup> Mr 12:29