

Before Abraham Was, I Am
John 8:48-59
May 22, 2016
Holy Trinity Sunday

The Jews answered [Jesus], "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

In the second book of Tolkien's Ring Trilogy, he introduces a fantasy character named Treebeard. Treebeard looks like a tree, but he can walk, talk, and feel emotions. He's a member of a race that loves and cares for trees.

As Treebeard explains his culture to some of the other characters in the book, one of the things he says is, "If something is worth saying, it is worth taking a long time to say." I think Treebeard would like the Athanasian Creed. It does take a long time to read it - so long that most congregations only read it once a year - today, on Trinity Sunday.

Now, if you are one of those who thinks this old and honorable creed is just a little on the long side, you should be very thankful for the theologians who came up with the words Trinity and Triune. If it weren't for these words, you would have to haul out the Athanasian Creed every time you wanted to talk about the three persons who are one God. The words Trinity and Triune save a lot of time in theological discussions whenever we want to talk about the true God who is three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There are those who try to tell us that since the word Trinity is not in the Bible, that God is not three persons. They argue that because the word Triune does not exist in the Bible, the idea of the Triune God is wrong. However, that's like saying things went flying off into space before Isaac Newton discovered gravity and gave us words and mathematics so that we could talk about it.

Things don't come into existence because we have words for them. Quite the opposite is true. We come up with words for things because they already exist. That's why theologians came up with the words Trinity and Triune, so that we can talk about God without saying God who is three persons who are coequal, coeternal, uncreated, and so

forth every time we wanted to discuss the things of God.

Even the Jewish leaders in today's Gospel should have been quite ready to allow that God is three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. After all, Psalm 2:7 tells us: "*You are my Son; today I have begotten You*" (Ps 2:7 ESV). When the Bible describes the beginning of creation, it says: *The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters* (Ge 1:2 ESV).

The Jewish leaders knew these words well. They just didn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God that the Psalmist was talking about. That's a problem that we still have today. Many people are quite ready to admit that there was a teacher from Nazareth named Jesus. Many are willing to admit that he had some good teachings and set a fine moral example for us to follow. Nevertheless, they reject the idea that Jesus is actually God.

On the other hand, the Bible tells us that Jesus is God in many ways. Some are very obvious and others are quite subtle.

When John the Baptist sent disciples to Jesus with the question: *Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?* (Lk 7:19 ESV), Jesus let his actions speak. He said: *Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me* (Lk 7:22-23 ESV). John's disciples could see that Jesus is the One by the things that He did.

Jesus showed his divinity with many miracles. He had chats with the weather and storms became calm. He took a boy's sack lunch of five loaves and two fish and fed thousands of people. He cured diseases. He even brought the dead back to life.

As John wrote in his Gospel account: *Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name* (Jn 20:30-31 ESV).

A little later on in John's Gospel we read: *There are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written* (Jn 21:25 ESV).

Perhaps the most ironic testimony to the divinity of Jesus is the testimony of his enemies. Christ's enemies often make it impossible for people to reject the possibility that Jesus is God. Christ's enemies often point out the outrageous nature of his teachings.

For example, when some men lowered a paralyzed man through a roof, Jesus said: *Man, your sins are forgiven* (Lk 5:20 ESV). Now we're so used to the idea that Jesus forgives sins that we might not notice that Jesus is also saying he is God, but his enemies will not let us forget this. In the next verse, the scribes and the Pharisees began to object: *Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?* (Lk 5:21 ESV).

We have a similar event in today's Gospel. This time the actions of the Jewish leaders remind us that Jesus claimed to be God. Jesus said to them: *Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am!*" (Jn 8:58 ESV). So they picked up stones to throw at him. The Jewish leaders were ready to stone Jesus to death because, once again, he was claiming to be God.

Understand, Jesus wasn't guilty of bad grammar. When Moses asked for God's name, God said to Moses: *I AM who I AM ... Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you"* (Ex 3:14 ESV).

With the words, *I AM*, Jesus is identifying himself as the person who appeared to Moses from the burning bush. He is saying that although he has a human body that is less than fifty years old, he is older than time. He is saying he is the one who is, who was, and who always will be. His enemies understood his meaning because they were ready to kill him for blasphemy.

This leads us to the conclusion that C. S. Lewis made in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis writes: *A man who was merely a man and said the sorts of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.*

The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus' teaching and called it blasphemy. They wanted to kill him, but it wasn't the right time. Jesus hid himself from this mob and left the temple.

Later, the time would be right and Jesus would allow mere men to nail him to a cross. The Jewish leaders would once again accuse him of blasphemy and convince the Romans to crucify him. On that cross, the Son of God, who is also fully human, would sacrifice himself for the sins of the world. When Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross, he purchased forgiveness, life, and salvation for all people.

Jesus' enemies could not keep him in the grave. He rose from the dead and proclaimed his victory. In his resurrection, we have the promise of eternal life with God.

Even people, who don't now believe that Jesus is God, have forgiveness set aside for them. It's on hold waiting for the day when the Holy Spirit brings their spirits to life and works faith in them. Then, they too will experience the love of the Triune God. They too will look forward to the day when they see God face to face in heaven.

Those who reject faith and forgiveness until the day they die will never experience the forgiveness that the Son of God has set aside for them. The forgiveness, life, and salvation that Jesus has already earned for them will remain unused. Instead, they will experience the full, dreadful consequences that they earned with their own sins. They

will spend eternity paying for those sins in hell, for they will have rejected the only gift that can save them.

Why is it so important that we understand that Jesus is God on this Trinity Sunday? If Jesus is not God, then he would be a cult leader who started a false religion that has deceived billions of people. We, who gather here, would be the most pathetic of people for we would look forward to a salvation that isn't there.

But Jesus is God. He is the second person of the Trinity who is also human, born of the Virgin Mary. He saved us from sin with his perfect life, and his sacrificial death. He promises us a new life with his resurrection and ascension. One day we shall all see him face to face, and those of us who believe will live with him forever. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God and Savior of the world. Amen.