

Trinity Sunday

How did belief in God the Holy Trinity become known? through revelation, yes, but revelation of what? Not by fuller disclosures of the majesty and immensity of God, but through the idea of God's diaconal ministry - bluntly put, His servant-hood.

It is a distortion to think of God the Holy Ghost as the divine proof-reader. For the glory of God the Holy Ghost is not His ability to produce an infallible text, nor an infallible anything. His majesty is beheld, not in his functions, but, in His divinity. His interaction with us, His creatures is one of love. The problem of our apprehension of God the Holy Ghost is not merely that there are fewer texts about Him; that He has, to use a hateful modernism, less of a profile, but that, when He is considered. He is seen as little more than a serviceable force. A useful force, moreover, to bolster claims advanced for some impulsive group, person or action. Anyone who is opposed is conveniently accused of "quenching the Spirit" or worse.

How, then, did we lose sight of the majesty of the Holy Ghost, in fact how have we so badly neglected the majesty of the Godhead as such? Respecting the latter, many a Jewish or Muslim believer might be quick to blame the doctrine of God as Trinity, and, superficially, they would be justified. The comparative remoteness of God in much of the Old Testament reinforces His sovereignty. A summersault comes with those words - among the least disputed within the New Testament - "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). We see it too in Phil.2:7 which refers to the 'self-emptying' of God, or again 2 Cor.8:9. As God, our Blessed Lord has reversed the order of things, although there may be very early hints of divine condescension. What of the oft overlooked Genesis 3:21? "Unto Adam and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins and clothed them." It could be argued that having created the sun and stars, making clothes from skin was no especially demeaning labour, yet this curious passage does seem to imply a service rendered by God for man. Curiously, that these clothes were created from something else, not from nothing, implies that the Holy One descends from Creator to skilled worker. Before human sin, man had rendered God acceptable service, subsequently, however, God would both judge and serve. From eternity God had been Father, Son and Holy Ghost, there never was when They were not. Nevertheless, not only is the Eternal Son introduced to humanity in terms of service and salvation, but Christ (in St. John's accounts) introduces the Eternal Spirit in such terms. Christ does not, of course, speak of the Holy Ghost as suffering or deprived in any way, but He does speak of Him in terms of advocacy, intercession and assistance. The Holy Ghost echoes and extends Christ's Person and work, and we experience a ministry that is shared between the Eternal Son and the Eternal Spirit. It is revealed that the central labour of love now rendered is the intercession that both divine Person offer in heaven (Rom. 8:26). So close is this overlapping, that rationalist New Testament scholars surmise that St. Paul only uses "Spirit" to indicate an aspect of the exulted Christ, not to signify a distinct identity. Such an explanation of St. Paul looks less credible if we take account of John 14:16, where the distinct identity of "another Comforter" is expressed emphatically.

The problem that we import into these passage is our reductionist wish for identifiable roles and utility. For some, even Christ's ministry diminishes their ability to recognise His divinity. For those who recognise Christ's exaltation (expressed supremely in His Ascension) Christ's servant-role does not obscure His divine nature. To put it crudely: Christ appears to us as upwardly mobile, whereas our clearest impression of the Holy Ghost is of His descent. The idea that Christ's ministry can be delegated to a creature, such as to St. Peter or St. John, is not hard for us to follow. That it can be delegated to an equal, however, actually has a de-personalising effect upon our recognition of Him. The fact that the Divine Persons of the Eternal Son and the Eternal Spirit have a shared ministry is a matter of the deepest thankfulness and joy, it should lead to our appreciation of a redeeming, re-creating God. The, sometimes, close identification of the work of Christ and the Holy Ghost should help us to see them as equally divine and equally central to our lives, rather than to suggest to us that the Holy Ghost is subordinate to Christ, or is a poor substitute for Him. This saving truth of the Adorable Trinity has, in recent times, not only been poorly taught, but, even underestimated. Our brethren in the Eastern Churches, perhaps, over-estimate the negative significance of our intruded words: "and the Son." Nevertheless, can an issue that has contributed to the division of the Church for so long be totally devoid of real significance? If the intercession of the Eternal Son has been delegated to the Eternal Spirit, perhaps there is some purpose behind this "filioque" motif but, as it stands, it seems poorly expressed. Indeed, looking at Luke 1:35, it might seem equally true to assert that there is, at least, a temporal procession of the Son from the Spirit. What we can never say is that the Father proceeds. To confess and emphasise "Through the Son" (rather than "and") may be to underline the extraordinariness of the shared work of redemption between Son and Spirit, and, further, of that paradoxical lowliness within the Creator which ministers to His creatures. This condescension reveals how a dying creation may be won, no more through skins divinely confected into coats, but, by clothing us with God's own Son and Strengthening Spirit.

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