

TRINITY SUNDAY 2008

MATTHEW 17:1-5 & MATTHEW 3:16-17

BY PASTOR JIM LINCOLN ON MAY 18, 2008

This morning, around the world, Christians are celebrating Trinity Sunday. Although there are several allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament, Jesus clarified and defined our beliefs about the real beauty and majesty of God as the Triune God.

He said in John 5 that the Father had given *all judgment to the Son*. That was an amazing claim and one that would be insane for a mere man to make. Jesus said that the Father did that, so that all would “honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” He said that the one who does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father who sent him. Of course it was talk like that landed him in big trouble.

Jesus’ being one essence with God the Father was the main point of Peter’s first sermon. After declaring the resurrection, Peter quoted David, “*The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand. So, let every one know that Jesus is both Lord and Christ,*” (Acts 2:34). Less was said about the Holy Spirit’s divinity. I imagine because one of the key characteristics of the Holy Spirit is to shine the light on the glory of Jesus. I think John Stott got it right when he said that the Holy Spirit gets *acutely embarrassed* when too much attention is brought to himself. However, when Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church, Peter said to them, “You have not lied to men but *to God,*” and then when he repeated the charge, he said that they had lied to the Holy Spirit.

So, when we talk about the Trinity, it’s easy to go from the shallow end of the pool to the deep end real fast. It’s easy to misstate what we believe. That’s why the early church worked so hard on capturing what we do know in creeds and statements.

ATHANASIUS:

There’s an old story about Athanasius, the fourth century church leader that stood up to Arius and protected the doctrine. One day while walking on the beach he saw a little girl carrying a small pail of water back and forth from the ocean to fill up a hole she had dug in the sand. Athanasius asked her, “Little girl, what are you doing?” She replied, “I’m putting the ocean in the hole I dug.” He said, “Little girl, don’t you

know that you could never put the vast ocean into your small hole?" She said, "*And you, how do you suppose that with your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?*" With that the child disappeared. That may be apocryphal, but it does remind us that we are talking about a depth we will never plumb.

But, a few explanations will prove to be helpful here. First, when we say that God is one essence and yet three persons, we are not saying that three is one and one is three. That would be a simple contradiction. The Scriptures aren't asking us to believe in a blatant contradiction. God is not one essence and three essences. He's one essence and three persons. And that's a majestic and beautiful thing.

When Sharon plays chords on the piano, they are majestic and beautiful things. But, the one musical chord C happens when she plays three notes (C, E, & G). Each note has a distinct contribution and characteristic. If you omit any one of the notes in the chord, it loses its beauty and fullness. Now the chord of C or any other chord is one in essence. But, the beauty and majesty of it, is in the unity and contribution of each distinct note. A chord is one and a chord is three. This isn't a contradiction. This is majesty and beauty.

Of course it's a flawed illustration. God is ultimately ineffable. No illustration will ever capture the full essence of God. But it helps to see what the Scriptures are claiming when they speak of the Trinity. The main Hebrew word for God, *Elohim* has a plural ending. It's a plural of majesty. In the beginning God said, "Let us make man in our image." Yet, the Scriptures say that the LORD God is one. Much like a musical chord, God is clearly one essence. However, He's a majestic essence of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, full of beauty, righteousness, and love. The implications of this are infinite. One is that God is never alone. He didn't create us because he was lonely or needy for companionship. He created us to share the love he has with the Son and Spirit. We don't worship three gods. We worship God who is one and yet three in person. So, we *neither confuse the persons nor divide the substance*.

ARIUS' OBJECTIONS

Not everyone has always agreed. Early in the 4th c., a bishop named Arius let two Biblical phrases get in the way of dozens of texts that affirmed Jesus' deity and he declared that the Son of God was not co-eternal with the Father. Instead, he said that God's Son was created.

Beget: John 3:16 says that Jesus was God's only *begotten* son. Arius said "begotten" meant "created". However, when you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. Men and women beget human babies, bunnies beget bunnies, and so on. God didn't create Jesus, He *begat* Jesus after His own eternal being. The

Westminster Confession puts it this way, "*The Son is not made but eternally begotten.*" And this, not as an act of will, but as an act of God's being. Jesus became a man when he was conceived but he has always been the begotten of the Father as God's eternal Son.¹ Arius was just wrong, "begotten" doesn't mean "created" or "made".

First born: Arius had another issue. He also believed that when Jesus was called "*First born* over all creation," it meant that he was a created being. But the word, "firstborn" was often used as a figure of speech to mean *first in status*. Isaac was called Abraham's firstborn and only begotten when he clearly wasn't Abraham's biological firstborn.

God's Son wasn't made or created. John even says that, "*apart from Jesus nothing that was made or created ever came into being.*" (Jn.1)

Arius' objections failed and the church affirmed Jesus' divinity. And of course, at stake was the eternal majesty and beauty of the eternal love that has always been between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

BEHOLDING HIS GLORY: THE SOURCE OF CHANGE

In 2Cor.3:8 Paul says that the kind of change that changes us more into the likeness of Jesus, from one degree of glory to another, comes about as we behold Jesus' glory.

So, this morning I want us to consider two episodes in Jesus' ministry when the Father revealed the true glory of His Son and spoke of what Jesus meant to him. I want us to behold, for a few moments the love and joy the Father takes in the Son. And then I'll try to show how that can affect us as we behold the wonder of that glory and love.

The texts are Matthew 17 and Matthew 3. So turn with me to Matthew 17. Here, God the Father says three things about Jesus. He rejoices in his majesty of His Beloved Son, he rejoices in the meekness of his beloved Son and then he calls us all to listen to Him. He affirms Jesus majesty, His meekness and His authority.

MATTHEW 17:1-5 (MAJESTY)

¹ The name "Creator" or "Savior" refer to acts of God's will, but in contrast his name as Father to the Son is a revelation of the identity of God *Himself*. The Father brings forth the Son by the act of being God, not by an act of will, so that the Son fully shares in the Father's deity and glory as God. There has never been, nor is it possible for there to be, any God and Father without the Son.

After feeding the four thousand, Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a high mountain. Verse two says that Jesus was transfigured before them. It says that *“His face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.”* Then in v.5, Matthew says, *“a bright cloud overshadowed them and God spoke from the cloud and said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”* Then He said, *“Listen to Him.”*

Notice what makes God smile. Notice what it is that takes God’s breath away with pleasure.² Notice what God loves and values? It’s His Son Jesus in the majesty of his radiant being and Sonship.

God lets the disciples in on the reality of Jesus’ majesty. And they see and hear that Jesus is much more glorious than they could have ever imagined. Verse 2 says, *“His face shone like the sun...His garments were white as light.”* Up to that time the true glory of Jesus was, for the most part, hidden from their sight. They did see his glory in his miracles as when he raised Lazarus and the widow’s son from the dead, walked on the water, and calmed the storm at sea. But, never before had they ever seen anything like this. Jesus’ face shone like the sun. But, how do you look at the sun? Not for long. Did they block or cover their eyes? How bright is unfiltered light? I had some laser treatments a few weeks ago and they put goggles over my eyes to protect them. But even through the goggles I could see the bright flash of light. Jesus’ face was like the sun and his clothes shone like light itself. And then, when the disciples heard the Father speak from the bright cloud, they fell on their faces and were terrified. What was going on here? God the Father was revealing the Son’s radiant glory. And it was much more than spiritual fireworks. There was a message. *“This, [the way you see him now] is my beloved Son.” This is the way Jesus truly is; this is the glory that truly belongs to Him and God loves and takes great pleasure in Him.*

God revealed Jesus in his divine glory and a blinding light and then says, *“This is my beloved Son in whom I take great pleasure. Listen to him.”*

When Jesus revealed himself to John on the island of Patmos, John said, *“His face was like the sun shining in full strength.”* Who can look on the sun shining in its full strength? Here’s the answer, *“God can.”* And someday when we are removed from the very presence of sin, we will be able to look at Jesus the way the Father looks at him without having to turn away. Then we shall be able to see him as he is. Some day we will be able to love and value His majesty, sustained and unhindered by sin. God gave his disciples a foretaste of that glory that awaits us. For a few moments, they were allowed to see the majesty of the Son’s true divine radiance in blinding light.

² I have improved upon John Piper’s lessons in the first two chapters of *The Pleasures of God*.

But His majesty was also revealed in what the Father said about him. He called Jesus His Son. For the Father to call Jesus His Son could not have been more amazing and astonishing. We can claim that we are children by creation or children by redemption. But Jesus claimed that He was God's Son *by essence*. This is what made the religious leaders so angry. They said to Jesus, "*You being a man call God your own Father making yourself out to be equal with God (Jn.5:18)*". And for this cause they were seeking all the more to kill Jesus. All Jesus had to do was to say,

"Oh, no! You've misunderstood me. I only meant that the Father and I are one in purpose and mission. I didn't mean that we are one in essence."

That's all he would have had to do and the fangs would have been retracted. But he let their understanding of his claim stand because that was exactly what he was claiming. His apostles all taught the same claim.

Colossians 2:9 says, "In him the *whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*."

Heb. 1:1ff, says

"Long ago God spoke to us through the prophets but in these last days he has spoke to us through his Son, who he appointed heir of all things, through whom he made the world. And (the son) is the *radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His being* and he upholds all things by the word of His power."

Colossians 1:19 adds God's delight to do this. "*In him all the fullness [of deity] was pleased to dwell*." God loves him as his only Son. God create or adopt a worthy man and then adopt him as his son. God himself as eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit (this majestic and beautiful chord of divinity), bestowed his own fullness on the man, Jesus, in the incarnation. He clothed the fullness of his own deity with human nature. Jn. 3:35 says, "*the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands*." Why does he love His glory as His only Son? Because the Son's Sonship is exercised with perfect righteousness, obedience, mercy, truth, beauty, wonder, fidelity and faithfulness. As his perfect and eternal Son he perfectly represents the Father's radiant glory and is an exact representation of His being. The Father loves the Son because he loves the beauty of his holiness. His is the only one worthy to open the scroll at the end of time. He is the only one worthy to carry out to perfection the plan the Father has to redeem and save sinners like us and make things right forever, for His glory and our joy. No one has loved the Father more than the Son. And no one but His Son is able and worthy enough to do what He has done for Him and us. This is so glorious that it captures the Father's greatest joy.

The Son is always faithful to the will of His Father. That's why he says beloved, "Listen to Him." He is worthy of your attention. The Father loves the majesty of His Son, His face shone like the sun his clothes were like pure light as the only and glorious Son of God. Do we love and take pleasure in that which God does? What captures your smile and heart?

Are you thirsty or weary for a great joy? Then listen to Jesus, rest in Jesus, rest in His gospel. Rest in His promises. Are you unsatisfied? Receive from Jesus, receive his Body and his Blood. Today is called the Feast of the Holy Trinity. It's a feast. Christians can't fast on Sundays or on Feast days. Pull your chair up to this table full of God's gladness and eat.

One of Leona Nettler's favorite verses was Isaiah 55:1ff.

"Ho! Everyone who thirsts come to the waters, and you who have no money come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money...Why do you spend money for what is not bread? And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to me. I'll make a covenant with you after the mercies of David."

Are you thirsty or hungry for the things your work and money can't buy? Look and listen to Jesus, God's only Son and he will satisfy your soul. Receive his mercy and grace, forgiveness and love.

Nothing can compare to the majestic banquet feast of the Lord Jesus who is God's Son and glory. All the power and capacity to love and be loved is found in Him.

MATTHEW 3:16-17 (MEEKNESS)

The Father delights in the Son's majesty. He also takes pleasure in his meekness. At Jesus' baptism, God the Father said almost these same words. But this time, he was not transfigured into the full nature of his radiance. This time a dove came from heaven; a gentle, peaceful and delicate dove. The dove was the kind of animal poor people would offer as a sacrifice in the temple. God's pleasure in his Son is not only in the radiance of his majesty but also in the wonder of his meekness. At his baptism Jesus identified with sinners like us and stood in line to be baptized with us. Nothing could have been more absurd, than Jesus identifying himself with sinners like us to be baptized. But, out of love, he did.

The phrase, "My servant in whom I am well pleased." Comes from Isa. 42. Listen to it.

"Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I am well pleased. I have put my Spirit upon Him he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise his voice. Nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not put out."

The Father rejoices with great joy over the gentle compassion of the Son. When a reed is bent over and about to break, The Son, with tender mercies, bends low, reaches out and tenderly lifts it up and holds it straight. When a candle wick is

smoldering and that tiny flame is about to go out, the Son does not blow it out. Instead, he draws near, comes close, cups his hands around that flickering bud of a light and he gently blows on it until it burns again.

Isn't this how the Lord Jesus is with us? That's what he did for me. Isn't that what he has done for you? Our backs were bent and breaking under the crushing weight of sin and shame. And Jesus came near. And just as he straightened out the woman who had been bent over all her life, Jesus straightens us up, with the tender grasp of his hand so that we can be forgiven and lifted up to enjoy God's smile and peace. And when the small flicker of light of hope was just about to go out, Jesus came near, cupped his hands around our souls and gently blew grace and mercy into our hearts.

Jesus is the majestic Lion of the tribe of Judah and He is the gentle Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. He said, "*No one has ever seen God; but the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.*" He said, "*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life for the sheep,*" (Jn.10:17).

And then Jesus said, "If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him," (Jn.12:26). He said, "I have made Your name known to them... wherewith the love you have for me may be in them and I in them." The eternal Son, lived for us, died for us, was raised up for us, and reigns for us. The same love the Father has for His son has now been poured out on us.

Can you believe this? How much love does the Father have for His Son? An infinite amount. Because of Jesus, that's how much God loves us, His children. Therefore, Listen to Him. Who else has better news than Jesus?

Therefore, beloved, today, may we worship the Triune God! May this majestic and beautiful chord that has rung out in all the earth ring in our hearts with wonder and joy! Why spend money for what is not really bread and wages for that which doesn't really satisfy. John Piper wrote something like this, "There is only one fountain of lasting joy and that is the ever flowing gladness of God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit who offer both majesty and his meekness to us who believe." It's a majestic and beautiful chord. Can you hear it?