

## Chapter 4

### The Holy Trinity

God of our fathers, enthroned in light, how rich, how musical is the tongue of England! Yet when we attempt to speak forth Thy wonders, our words how poor they seem and our speech how unmelodious. When we consider the fearful mystery of Thy Triune Godhead we lay our hand upon our mouth. Before that burning bush we ask not to understand, but only that we may fitly adore Thee, One God in Persons Three. Amen.

To meditate on the three Persons of the Godhead is to walk in thought through the garden eastward in Eden and to tread on holy ground. Our sincerest effort to grasp the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity must remain forever futile, and only by deepest reverence can it be saved from actual presumption.

Some persons who reject all they cannot explain have denied that God is a Trinity. Subjecting the Most High to their cold, level-eyed scrutiny, they conclude that it is impossible that he could be both One and Three. These forget that their whole life is enshrouded in mystery. They fail to consider that any real explanation of even the simplest phenomenon in nature lies hidden in obscurity and can no more be explained than can the mystery of the Godhead.

Every man lives by faith, the nonbeliever as well as the saint; the one by faith in natural laws and the other by faith in God. Every man throughout his entire life constantly accepts without understanding. The most learned sage can be reduced to silence with one simple question, **What?** The answer to that question lies forever in the abyss of unknowing beyond any man's ability to discover. **God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof** but mortal man never.

Thomas Carlyle, following Plato, pictures a man, a deep pagan thinker, who had grown to maturity in some hidden cave and is brought out suddenly to see the sun rise. **What would his wonder be,** exclaims Carlyle, **his rapt astonishment at the sight we daily witness with indifference! With the free, open**

sense of a child, yet with the ripe faculty of a man, his whole heart would be kindled by that sight.... This green flowery rock-built earth, the trees, the mountains, rivers, many-sounding seas; that great deep sea of azure that swims overhead; the winds sweeping through it; the black cloud fashioning itself together, now pouring out fire, now hail and rain; what is it? Ay, what? At bottom we do not yet know; we can never know at all. ¶¶¶

How different are we who have grown used to it, who have become jaded with a satiety of wonder. ¶¶¶It is not by our superior insight that we escape the difficulty, ¶¶¶ says Carlyle, ¶¶¶it is by our superior levity, our inattention, our want of insight. It is by not thinking that we cease to wonder at it.... We call that fire of the black thundercloud electricity, and lecture learnedly about it, and grind the like of it out of glass and silk: but what is it? Whence comes it? Whither goes it? Science has done much for us; but it is a poor science that would hide from us the great deep sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which all science swims as a mere superficial film. This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, magical and more, to whosoever will think of it. ¶¶¶

These penetrating, almost prophetic, words were written more than a century ago, but not all the breath-taking advances of science and technology since that time have invalidated one word or rendered obsolete as much as one period or comma. Still we do not know. We save face by repeating frivolously the popular jargon of science. We harness the mighty energy that rushes through our world; we subject it to fingertip control in our cars and our kitchens; we make it work for us like Aladdin's jinn, but still we do not know what it is. Secularism, materialism, and the intrusive presence of things have put out the light in our souls and turned us into a generation of zombies. We cover our deep ignorance with words, but we are ashamed to wonder, we are afraid to whisper ¶¶¶mystery. ¶¶¶

The Church has not hesitated to teach the doctrine of the Trinity. Without pretending to understand, she has given her witness, she has repeated what the Holy Scriptures teach.

Some deny that the Scriptures teach the Trinity of the Godhead on the ground that the whole idea of trinity in unity is a contradiction in terms; but since we cannot understand the fall of a leaf by the roadside or the hatching of a robin's egg in the nest yonder, why should the Trinity be a problem to us?

¶¶¶ We think more loftily of God, ¶¶¶ says Michael de Molinos, ¶¶¶ by knowing that He is incomprehensible, and above our understanding, than by conceiving Him under any image, and creature beauty, according to our rude understanding. ¶¶¶

Not all who called themselves Christians through the centuries were Trinitarians, but as the presence of God in the fiery pillar glowed above the camp of Israel throughout the wilderness journey, saying to all the world, ¶¶¶ These are My people, ¶¶¶ so belief in the Trinity has since the days of the apostles shone above the Church of the Firstborn as she journeyed down the years. Purity and power have followed this faith. Under this banner have gone forth apostles, fathers, martyrs, mystics, hymnists, reformers, revivalists, and the seal of divine approval has rested on their lives and their labors. However they may have differed on minor matters, the doctrine of the Trinity bound them together.

What God declares the believing heart confesses without the need of further proof. Indeed, to seek proof is to admit doubt, and to obtain proof is to render faith superfluous. Everyone who possesses the gift of faith will recognize the wisdom of those daring words of one of the early Church fathers: ¶¶¶ I believe that Christ died for me because it is incredible; I believe that he rose from the dead because it is impossible. ¶¶¶

That was the attitude of Abraham, who against all evidence waxed strong in faith, giving glory to God. It was the attitude of Anselm, ¶¶¶ the second Augustine, ¶¶¶ one of the greatest thinkers of the Christian era, who held that faith must precede all effort to understand. Reflection upon revealed truth naturally follows the advent of faith, but faith comes first to the hearing ear, not to the cogitating mind. The believing man does not ponder the Word and arrive at faith by a process of reasoning, not does he seek confirmation of faith from philosophy or science. His cry is, ¶¶¶ O earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar. ¶¶¶

Is this to dismiss scholarship as valueless in the sphere of revealed religion? By no means. The scholar has a vitally important task to perform within a carefully prescribed precinct. His task is to guarantee the purity of the text, to get as close as possible to the Word as originally given. He may compare Scripture with Scripture until he has discovered the true meaning of the text. But right there his authority ends. He must never sit in judgment upon what is written. He dare not bring the meaning of the Word before the bar of his reason. He dare not commend or condemn the Word as reasonable or unreasonable, scientific or unscientific. After the meaning is discovered, that meaning judges him; never does he judge it.

The doctrine of the Trinity is truth for the heart. The spirit of man alone can enter through the veil and penetrate into that Holy of Holies. ¶¶¶ Let me seek Thee in longing, ¶¶¶ pleaded Anselm, ¶¶¶ let me long for Thee in seeking; let me find Thee in love, and love Thee in finding. ¶¶¶ Love and faith are at home in the mystery of the Godhead. Let reason kneel in reverence outside.

Christ did not hesitate to use the plural form when speaking of Himself along with the Father and the Spirit. ¶¶¶ We will come unto him and make our abode with him. ¶¶¶ Yet again He said, ¶¶¶ I and my Father are one. ¶¶¶ It is most important that we think of God as Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Substance. Only so may we think rightly of God and in a manner worthy of Him and of our own souls.

It was our Lord's claim to equality with the Father that outraged the religionists of His day and led at last to His crucifixion. The attack on the doctrine of the Trinity two centuries later by Arius and others was also aimed at Christ's claim to deity. During the Arian controversy 318 Church fathers (many of them maimed and scarred by the physical violence suffered in earlier persecutions) met at Nicaea and adopted a statement of faith, one section of which runs:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
The only-begotten Son of God,

Begotten of Him before all ages,  
God of God, Light of Light,  
Very God of Very God,  
Begotten, not made,  
Being of one substance with the Father,  
By whom all things were made.

For more than sixteen hundred years this has stood as the final test of orthodoxy, as well it should, for it condenses in theological language the teaching of the New Testament concerning the position of the Son in the Godhead.

The Nicene Creed also pays tribute to the Holy Spirit as being Himself God and equal to the Father and the Son:

I believe in the Holy Spirit  
The Lord and giver of life,  
Which proceedeth from the Father and the Son,  
Who with the Father and Son together  
Is worshipped and glorified.

Apart from the question of whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son, this tenet of the ancient creed has been held by the Eastern and Western branches of the Church and by all but a tiny minority of Christians.

The authors of the Athanasian Creed spelled out with great care the relation of the three Persons to each other, filling in the gaps in human thought as far as they were able while staying within the bounds of the inspired Word. ¶¶¶ In this Trinity, ¶¶¶ runs the Creed, ¶¶¶ nothing is before or after, nothing is greater or less: but all three Persons coeternal, together and equal. ¶¶¶

How do these words harmonize with the saying of Jesus, ¶¶¶ My Father is greater than I ¶¶¶? Those old theologians knew, and wrote into the Creed, ¶¶¶ Equal to His Father, as touching His Godhead; less than the Father, as touching His

manhood, and this interpretation commends itself to every serious-minded seeker after truth in a region where the light is all but blinding.

To redeem mankind the Eternal Son did not leave the bosom of the Father; while walking among men He referred to Himself as the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, and spoke of Himself again as the Son of man which is in heaven. We grant mystery here, but not confusion. In His incarnation the son veiled His deity, but He did not void it. The unity of the Godhead made it impossible that He should surrender anything of His deity. When He took upon Him the nature of man, He did not degrade Himself or become even for a time less than He had been before. God can never become less than Himself. For God to become anything that He has not been is unthinkable.

The Persons of the Godhead, being one, have one will. They work always together, and never one smallest act is done by one without the instant acquiescence of the other two. Every act of God is accomplished by the Trinity in Unity. Here, of course, we are being driven by necessity to conceive of God in human terms. We are thinking of God by analogy with man, and the result must fall short of ultimate truth; yet if we are to think of God at all, we must do it by adapting creature-thoughts and creature-words to the Creator. It is a real if understandable error to conceive of the Persons of the Godhead as conferring with one another and reaching agreement by interchange of thought as humans do. It has always seemed to me that Milton introduces an element of weakness into his celebrated *Paradise Lost* when he presents the Persons of the Godhead conversing with each other about the redemption of the human race.

When the Son of God walked the earth as the Son of Man, He spoke often to the Father and the Father answered Him again; as the Son of Man, He now intercedes with God for His people. The dialogue involving the Father and the Son recorded in the Scriptures is always to be understood as being between the Eternal Father and the Man Christ Jesus. That instant, immediate communion between the Persons of the

Godhead which has been from all eternity knows not sound  
nor effort nor motion.

Amid the eternal silences

God's endless Word was spoken;

None heard but He who always spake,

And the silence was unbroken.

O marvellous! O worshipful!

No song or sound is heard,

But everywhere and every hour

In love, in wisdom, and in power,

The Father speaks His dear Eternal Word.

Frederick W. Faber

A popular belief among Christians divide the work of God between the three Persons, giving a specific part to each, as, for instance, creation to the Father, redemption to the Son, and regeneration to the Holy Spirit. This is partly true but not wholly so, for God cannot so divide Himself that one Person works while another is inactive. In the Scriptures the three Persons are shown to act in harmonious unity in all the mighty works that are wrought throughout the universe.

In the Holy Scriptures the work of creation is attributed to the Father (Gen. 1:1), to the Son (Col. 1:16), and to the Holy Spirit (Job. 26:13 and Ps. 104:30). The incarnation is shown to have been accomplished by the three Persons in full accord (Luke 1:35), though only the Son became flesh to dwell among us. At Christ's baptism the Son came up out of the water, the Spirit descended upon Him and the Father's voice spoke from heaven (Matt. 3:16, 17). Probably the most beautiful description of the work of atonement is found in Hebrews 9:14, where it is stated that Christ, through the Eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God; and there we behold the three persons operating together.

The resurrection of Christ is likewise attributed variously to the Father (Acts 2:32), to the Son (John 10:17-18), and to the

Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4). The salvation of the individual man is shown by the apostle Peter to be the work of all three Persons of the Godhead (1 Pet. 1:2), and the indwelling of the Christian man's soul is said to be by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-23).

The doctrine of the Trinity, as I have said before, is truth for the heart. The fact that it cannot be satisfactorily explained, instead of being against it, is in its favor. Such a truth had to be revealed; no one could have imagined it.

O Blessed Trinity!

O simplest Majesty! O Three in One!

Thou art for ever God alone.

Holy Trinity!

Blessed equal Three.

One God, we praise Thee.

Frederick W. Faber