

“The foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.” (Isaiah 6.4)

For the last five months, from Christmas until now, we have been following closely a narrative of Christ’s life from his Incarnation to his Ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. In these stories, we have been blessed to re-experience what St. Luke called in last week’s lesson the “mighty works of God” (Acts 2.11). From the infant birth in Bethlehem, to his death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit.

Through these mighty acts, we have been witnesses to the three persons of God in action, those to whom we address all our prayers: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Paradoxically, this Holy Trinity is one God, but three distinct persons – all revealed to us in Holy Scripture. It was precisely this paradox, “how do we worship one God, not three, and still affirm the Trinity?”, that inspired hundreds of years of theology and even the Nicene Creed which we just recited here together.

For, as you can see on the cover of your bulletin, the Trinity is made up of the three persons of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons, one God. The Tri-une God: the Holy Trinity. All three of these persons are God, but all three of these persons are not the other persons. The first of our Anglican Articles of Religion defines our faith in the Holy Trinity in this way: “THERE is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power and eternity; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.”¹

We see all three persons of the Holy Trinity in the story of Jesus’ baptism, when Jesus is in the River Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father is heard from the clouds. Jesus later tells his apostles to go forth and baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28.19). It is one of those mysterious unions where we can continue to claim we are a monotheistic religion that only worships one God, but outsiders might think we have three gods. As Jesus tells Nicodemus in the Gospel, God is capable of things we simply cannot understand: *“If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not; how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?”*

One way that our lessons today explore the majesty and holiness of God is through the visions received by the Prophet Isaiah and St. John the Divine. In these visions, we encounter representations of how God’s image, his very presence, can be so overwhelming that our human words cannot properly express what we’re seeing.

I would like for us to look in more detail at our Lesson from Revelation. The fourth chapter of this book, which we read this afternoon, is a wonderful image of God’s throne in heaven. St. John, whose vision this is, sees an open door leading to heaven. From there, he is able to glimpse the Glory of the Lord as it is presented. The Holy Spirit takes him, and brings him before a mighty throne – a throne of great power and glory. And there was one seated upon the throne, whom we presume to be God the Father.

We read: *“He who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lighting and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches or fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures...the first...like a lion, the second...like an ox, the third...with the face of a man, and the fourth...like an eagle in flight... [who] never cease to say, “Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Rev. 4.3-8).*

¹ BCP, p. 699

It is a wonderful scene, and so full of symbolic imagery. And, if you were paying attention to details, it hearkens back to both our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 6 and also the vision of Ezekiel found at the beginning of his book. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the prophet Daniel, all had visions of heaven which resemble or inform this vision of John's. The details about the place, and the figure in the throne itself, all harken back to descriptions of God in the Old Testament – but some of the details here also proclaim the New Testament as well. The twenty-four elders surrounding God on their thrones and in their crowns and white robes can be described as representing both covenants. The Old, by the 12 tribes of Israel. The New, by the 12 apostles of Jesus. Together, twenty-four, bringing all of God's people together for all time. This is a similar image to later in chapter 21, when there are 12 foundation stones (which represent the tribes of Israel), upon which are built the 12 strong walls of the new heavenly Jerusalem (the 12 apostles of Christ).

Furthermore, we have the four living creatures. These four are a re-working of the living creatures found both in Ezekiel and Isaiah, and they have come to represent the four Gospels from early-on in the Church's history. The Man, representing Matthew; the Lion, representing Mark; the calf, representing Luke; and the Eagle, representing John. St. Irenaeus, in the 2nd century, was the first to make this association, and it remains with us to this day.

These four living creatures praise God in the words we hear in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah from the mouths of the Cherubim: "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty". When the twenty-four elders hear the living creatures say this, they fall down before him who is seated on the throne, and they throw their crowns before the throne, worshipping him. The Church, of course, uses these words, which you will be familiar with, in our preparation for Holy Communion, when we say them together, joining with the praise and worship of the heavenly chorus. The Lord God Almighty, the triune creator and sustainer of the world, receives his worthy praise and adoration, even if John cannot properly find the words to express what he sees.

This God, who is both simultaneously wholly mysterious to us, and wholly familiar to us because of Christ, is this Tri-unity which we worship and adore ourselves. He is so complex, it is impossible for us to ever fully understand him, for we only can really understand what he reveals to us, especially through the persons of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. God, who exists outside of time, and exists for all time, and in all places, is truly beyond our human understanding. Yet, when the prophets are granted glimpses into heaven, they see the whole created order bowing down before him.

As Jesus says to Nicodemus, we mortals cannot begin to imagine heavenly things because we have a hard time enough explaining and understanding earthly things. And, like Isaiah, we may feel unworthy to be in the presence of such divine power. Yet, despite our inability to understand or unworthiness to behold him, we hear the words that God has spoken through Jesus the Son, and can know them to be true, for Jesus says they are. And those words that Jesus speaks, as he does in today's Gospel, is that those who believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life. These words of Jesus are much like the burning coal which touched Isaiah's lips when the Seraph said, "your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

On this Trinity Sunday, we remind ourselves who we worship and why we worship. That is the Lord God Almighty, "which was, and which is, and which is to come." The God who created the universe and all that is in it, the God who led a people to be in right relationship with their creator, a God who sent himself into the world to save and redeem the world, and a God who promises all who love him the gift of eternal life. What a most wonderful, sacred, and glorious thing it is to be loved by a most wonderful and loving creator. And so for this season celebrating the Holy Trinity, we are asked to turn our hearts heavenward, and learn about all those things that Jesus told about his Father and the Spirit, "that we may worship One God in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity."

Let us therefore join in the song of heaven with the twenty-and-four elders of Revelation in saying "*Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created*" (Rev. 4.11). Amen.