

Glory Be ...!

In the name of him who is exalted at the right hand of the throne of God, dear friends in Christ: You are, no doubt, very familiar with this phrase: “*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.*” It’s an ascription of praise to our Triune God that’s called the “Gloria Patri” or sometimes just the “Gloria”, and you’ve probably noticed that it shows up regularly in our worship services. We say it after every psalm and introit, which means we repeat it at least once each week; and those Sundays on which we use the order of Matins or Morning Prayer it shows up no less than three times in the course of the service. So we say it a lot; and the funny thing is that unlike almost all of the other things we say during a worship service, this particular phrase is not lifted directly from the Scripture. You won’t find that sentence your Bible. So, what’s up with that? If it isn’t even a biblical expression, why do we repeat it so often?

Perhaps you’re so used to hearing it, you never really thought about it; or maybe you figured it’s just one of those churchly sounding phrases that people who write orders of worship use to pad the service to make it last longer. Actually, there’s a whole lot more to it than that. You see, the use of this phrase has its roots in the very earliest Christian worship services. Think back to the time of the Apostles and the mission work done by St. Paul and others which is recorded for us in the book of Acts. Back then most Christian congregations sprang from existing Jewish synagogues. Somebody like Paul would show up for their regular Sabbath worship one day and he’d be invited to speak. He’d use the opportunity to teach about Jesus and explain how he was the promised Messiah they’d all been waiting for. Typically, what would happen is that some folks would hear the Gospel and believe in Jesus and others wouldn’t – and so you’d end up with a division in the house—and usually an angry and bitter division at that. The one exception was the synagogue at Berea where it seems that the whole congregation became believers in Jesus after hearing Paul speak several times. In any case, what would *usually* happen is that the new Christians would be expelled from their local synagogues and they’d have to meet for worship someplace else. Which they did – but the only way they knew how to worship was the way they always had before, which is pretty much like we do still today: hymns, psalms, readings, a sermon, and so on.

So, imagine that you’re a Jewish visitor to a city in the ancient world where there’s a traditional Jewish synagogue and a now new congregation of Christians. If you walked into either one, the worship service would look pretty much exactly the same to you in both places. Same psalms, same hymns, same readings – the *only* difference would be in the sermon. At one place they’d be talking about the Messiah they still expected to come and at the other the preacher would be explaining how the Scriptures and messianic promises are all fulfilled in Jesus. This of course could lead to a lot of confusion (especially since a lot of people use the time for the sermon to catch up on their sleep – or they go into what I call “sermon listening mode” [blank expression, mouth open, eyes glazed over, etc.]). So that was one problem: no easily discernable difference between Jewish and Christian worship services. The other problem was that it really irked traditional Jews that the Christians were using the same psalms and Scriptures that they were. “This is our Bible”, they thought. “You don’t have a right to it.” As a result of all this, the early Christians found it necessary to clearly distinguish themselves from the traditional Jews who refused to recognize Jesus, and at the same time they wanted very much to claim the Scriptures as their own. In their minds (and they were correct in this) the psalms and books of the Old Testament were Christian writings. In fact, only believers in Jesus, people who had been illumined by the Holy Spirit and who trusted in Jesus as their Savior, could properly understand what the Scriptures are all about. And so, as a way to express these things, to distinguish themselves from traditional Jews *and* to claim the Scriptures as their own uniquely Christian writings, whenever a psalm was recited, or the Scriptures were read they would conclude it with an expression of praise to the Triune God. So, the use of the Gloria Patri was in part praise to God, but also it was meant as a creedal statement.

But the Gloria they used at first was a little different than the one we use today. Initially it went like this: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen” – which simply means that the three persons of the Trinity are praised forever. What was missing was second the line that says “as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever”. That was added in the 300s during the height of the Arian controversy. After more than two hundred years of the Christian Church, no one was confusing Jews and Christians any more. The lines between the two had been clearly drawn by that point. But there were problems within the Christian Church between orthodox believers and the followers of a guy named Arius. Anyone who thinks that religious controversy and division within the Church is something that only took place after the Reformation should brush up on their history.

Anyway, this Arius was in charge of several churches in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a very intelligent and influential guy, and he had a huge following. He was also a flaming heretic. He thought the concept of the Trinity (one God in three persons) is just too hard to understand – and if he couldn’t understand it, then, he reasoned, it simply couldn’t be right. (You see, he was also a very humble fellow.) So he concocted a philosophy that denied the Trinity. He said there’s the one God we call the Father, and he’s really the only God there is. What the Scriptures *call* God’s Son, is a created being, more like a super angel. This created super angel then comes to earth as Jesus and lives and dies and rises again. Then, after his ascension into heaven, *this* Jesus is promoted to a sort of junior godhood – but he’s not God in the same sense as the Father – not even remotely. When the Scriptures call Jesus *God*, said Arius, we are to understand it as sort of an honorary title. It’s like we should use a capital G when referring to God the Father and a lower-case g when talking about “god” the Son. When he got to Holy Spirit, Arius decided to get rid of him altogether. The Holy Spirit, he said, is not a *person* of the Trinity, nor is he an individual, thinking, separate identity; but rather an *it*. Arius said the Spirit is an impersonal force or energy by which God accomplishes his will. To him the Holy Spirit was kind of like electricity: it does stuff; but you can’t see it and you certainly can’t talk to it – there’s nobody there.

Now, at this point you may be wondering what difference it makes how somebody thinks about the Trinity. It’s a complicated idea that isn’t clearly spelled out for us in any one place in the Scripture. Instead you have to pull together passages from all over the Bible to derive the Church’s doctrine concerning the Trinity. Since that’s the case, so what if someone gets it a little mixed up? Is it that big a deal? I mean if someone holds the orthodox view of the Trinity like we do or the Arian view that denies it, does it really make a difference? Is it worth arguing about? Is it worth dividing the Church over? A lot of people were asking those same questions way back in the fourth century. They just wanted everyone to get along.

Fortunately for us, there were also back then some very clever and committed Christian theologians who understood exactly what was at stake. Two things in particular leapt out at them: first, and perhaps most obviously, in order to hold the views of Arius, you had to throw out certain very clear passages of Scripture; specifically, the ones that say Jesus really is God (like we heard in today’s readings). You also must throw out the passages that say the Holy Spirit is an individual, separate, person of the Godhead who thinks and acts and has feelings of his own. What Arius had to do to believe what he did was to allow his human reason to override the Word of God – and that’s always a dangerous thing to do. And once you start down that path, where do you stop? If you can throw out *some* of the Bible, what’s to stop you from throwing out *any* part that you find difficult, or offensive, or that just doesn’t suit you? No, the reason we hold the orthodox view of the Trinity that we do, as complicated as it is, is precisely because we hold God’s Word to be true even when it doesn’t make perfect sense to us. We allow for the fact that God is a being who surpasses our powers of comprehension. We are willing to admit that God is a whole lot bigger and smarter than us.

But secondly, and of primary importance, the teaching of Arius casts a shadow of doubt on the Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus. You see, if Jesus is just some created being when he suffers and dies on the cross, and not truly God, then the atonement he made for sin must necessarily be limited in some sense. If it’s not God with a capital G who dies for sin, then you can never be sure that the whole price is paid – and if that’s the case, how can you be sure that your sins are covered? Arius’ view also casts God and his love for us in a rather negative light. If you hold to what he taught, then God didn’t love you so that he gave his only-begotten Son to death on a cross. Instead, he simply whipped up a rather elaborate sacrificial lamb to do the job. The cost to him was minimal: it’s the difference between a father offering his own flesh and blood son or

surrendering the family pet. The orthodox theologians of the fourth century correctly saw that Arius' view of God undermined and destroyed the heart of the Gospel. It had to be rejected.

And again, fortunately, the orthodox theologians understood this. And that's why they also understood that it was absolutely necessary to cleanse the Church of the soul-destroying doctrines taught by Arius and his many followers. And just so that we understand it, this wasn't a case of the big bad church picking on the little guy. In many places the supporters of Arius were in the majority, and in those places orthodox pastors and teachers were persecuted mercilessly. I should mention here too that the views of Arius were not the only faulty teachings on the Trinity that were gaining popularity. Other groups were teaching what is called *modalism*. The basic idea is that there is one God who appears in three different persons; but it's just an act – it's really the same guy. The only question is which disguise is he wearing today? It's like Clark Kent and Superman: same guy, two different outfits. So it is with God, said the modalists. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are simply three disguises for the one person of God. And when, say, the Father and Son are talking together, well, that's just a schizophrenic act they stage for our benefit. It's as if God says, "I will help them understand me by confusing them completely." And if that doesn't make sense to you, good; it shouldn't. And though I haven't the time to unpack it for you this morning, suffice it to say that modalism also contradicts Scripture and ultimately undermines the Gospel of salvation.

So, anyway, with the Christian Church in disarray and threatening to fragment into pieces over the doctrine of the Trinity, the leaders of the Church in various places decided to get together and hash it all out once and for all. They met in the year A.D. 325 at Nicaea, a Greek city in what is Turkey today. There all the various factions presented their positions. They listened, and they debated. They searched the Scriptures for answers, and then they listened and debated some more. At times the arguments got pretty heated. It's reported that at one point the bishop of Myra, a fellow named Nicholas (the same fellow we know better as "Jolly ol' St. Nick") became so exasperated with Arius and his weaselly way of arguing that he walked across the room and slapped him upside the head. The council did not approve of the use of violence, and Nicholas was almost removed from his office; but he apologized profusely, and he was forgiven. (I suspect that part of the reason he was forgiven so easily is that he wasn't the only bishop present who felt that the only way to get some sense into Arius was to beat it into him. Fortunately, Nicholas learned his lesson. I've heard that now when people upset him he doesn't slap them, he just gives them a lump of coal.)

Okay, cutting to the chase, the result of all this discussion was that the vast majority of the church leaders at Nicaea were able to formulate and agree to a single statement that presented the correct and biblical doctrine of the Trinity *and* of the person and work of Jesus Christ. We call this statement, not surprisingly, the Nicene Creed, which we together with the whole Christian Church on earth continue to confess today. It clearly distinguishes the three persons of the Trinity, keeping them separate, and yet calling each one God while at the same time affirming that there is only one God. And, like today's three Scripture readings, over and against the teachings of Arius, it stresses the fact that Jesus Christ is truly God. That's what the part that says, "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God" means. It's the same thing we said this morning in the Athanasian Creed when we said: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man; God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of his mother, born in the world; Perfect God and perfect man ..."—and the word *perfect* there means *completely*.

Unfortunately, not everyone was happy with the orthodox consensus. Arius and his followers went underground, so to speak, and continued to hold and to spread their false views. And so, as sort of a way to exclude the Arian heresy and to prevent it from infecting the Church all over again, they added to the Gloria Patri that line that says, "*As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.*" That way, whenever a psalm or Scripture was read, the congregation would respond by praising the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are all equally worthy of glory, and who have always been and always will be—which, of course, is exactly the opposite of what Arius taught. So now, just as the phrase had once been used to distinguish Christians and Jews, it would also be used to distinguish orthodox Christians from the anti-Trinitarian heretics.

In conclusion, today, Holy Trinity Sunday, we celebrate a major victory in the constant war to preserve the integrity of God's truth against the steady attempts of Satan to lead us astray – and ultimately to shake our confidence in the salvation won for us by the Lord Jesus. We mark too how God keeps the Church in the one

true faith not by avoiding conflict; but rather by confronting it head on and directing his servants to dig deeply into his Word through which the Holy Spirit is able to enlighten us and direct our thoughts and lead us into all truth. So may the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us continue to keep us in the one true faith as we continue to give him all honor praise as we confess together, *“Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.”*

Soli Deo Gloria!