

TRINITY/THE FOURTH CENTURY



The ancient scroll of the Book of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your being, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

These verses from the Book of Deuteronomy are the great Jewish confession of faith, called the Shema or the Shema Israel, which has been recited in the prayers of observant Jews

for millennia, every morning and every evening, when they lie down and when they rise up. These very verses are inscribed on parchment placed inside the mezuzahs on the doorposts of your Jewish friends. And so from the most ancient times, the Jews have firmly asserted their belief in one God --- Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one --- and he is a jealous God, such that thou shalt have no other god beside Him, say the Ten Commandments. This singular belief is perhaps the thing that most distinguished Judaism from the other historic religions of that time. For the Jews were monotheistic when other world religions were not, and **that** is the tradition that early Christians, who were of course first Jews, inherited from their forefathers and from Jesus of Nazareth.

So how then did we get from that historic Jewish heritage of monotheism to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity, which we celebrate today? Well, it is a long and winding road, with many exit ramps along the way. For the first hundred years or so of the early church, Christians argued about who Jesus was with other Jews, often causing riots in the synagogues and marketplaces. These arguments were about whether Jesus was really the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and if so, what that really meant. As Gentiles slowly joined the early Christian communities, the first questions raised were, of course, whether these new followers of Jesus had to become Jews themselves,

whether had to be circumcised or keep the Mosaic laws. All along the way, Christians argued about the specialness of Jesus in every way possible, with stories of his resurrection, his teachings, his miracles, suggested fulfilment of the earlier Jewish prophecies, and later even stories of a virgin birth.

In the second and third centuries of the Common Era, Christians had begun to move out from the synagogues and form house churches of their own, all the while welcoming more and more Gentile converts. Now, Christians began preaching about who Jesus really was less in the synagogues and more in the Roman marketplace. The audience now was no longer primarily religious Jews but Greeks and God-fearing Romans. And there is an ongoing theological tension in our history then, and now, between the ancient Jewish mindset and the Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire. For Greeks and Romans were long accustomed to entertaining the idea of many Gods, and Gods that appear very human in their form on occasion. This was the era of the great Christological controversies of the church, as you will hear about some in the Month of Heresies summer preaching series that begins next week. Christians regularly struggled to retain their Jewish monotheistic heritage while at the same time remaining faithful to their understanding of the uniqueness of the person of Jesus. Those Christological debates of the second and third century, lead in time to the great Trinitarian debates of the

fourth century. Accordingly, we must acknowledge that the Doctrine of the Trinity is a late addition to the Christian faith, one that is not firmly established in the Scriptures, nor *formally* defined until the fourth century.

It is the fourth century that brought us the formation of the Christian Bible and the Nicene Creed as a means of establishing orthodoxy, right thinking. When the Fourth Century began, the pagan Emperors Diocletian and Galerius sought to unify a fractured Roman Empire by a widespread persecution of Christians, because the insulting attitudes of Christians towards pagan gods and lifestyles smacked of fanaticism and created division within the Empire. By the end of the same fourth century, the Emperor Theodosius had not only outlawed all religions except Christianity, but also outlawed all Christian theologies except one, as represented in the Nicene Creed, and then he began violently persecuting transgressors, or heretics as they were called, also in the cause of unity. At the beginning of the fourth century, it is estimated by historians that only 10% of the Roman Empire was Christian, but by the end of the fourth century, 80% of the Roman Empire were Christians, and this Christianity has remained the dominant religion of the West right up until the present day.

The fourth century was a time when religious belief became the principal instrument of political power in the Roman Empire.

It was much less about theology and orthodox thinking, and much more about politics and influence. Last year on Trinity Sunday, I mentioned a fascinating book about the fourth century entitled "When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome," authored by Richard Rubenstein, who I noted as not a theologian or a church historian, but a professor of Conflict Resolution and Public Affairs at George Mason University in Washington. It was a fascinating insight into the theological debates that ravaged the church and the Empire during the fourth century. Or one might read the book entitled, "(The) Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 years" by John Philip Jenkins of my alma mater, Baylor University.

One of the principal results of those great theological debates and power struggles of the fourth century is that Doctrine of the Trinity --- our declaration as Christians that we believe in One God in Three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the singular doctrine that most distinguishes Christianity from the other world religions. For in some sense, we declare that our religious founder, Jesus, was God, very God of very God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father. This kind of thing is not said of the Buddha, or Mohamed, or Confucius, or even Moses.

But sadly the doctrine of the Trinity has also become, perhaps more than any other Christian doctrine, incomprehensible and meaningless to the average person in the pew. A careful theological explanation of the Doctrine of the Trinity often appears less like a crucial expression of the simple faith of common people, and more like a mathematical puzzle, three in one, and one in three, somehow trying to preserve our monotheistic Jewish heritage while at the same time affirming the specialness and separateness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The relevance or importance of these principles in our everyday lives is often lost. Because this basic understanding has been so formalized into creeds and confessions, most of us blindly assent to Trinitarian statements and declarations without any real connection with them to the history and politics of the early Church, or to our own personal struggles in life and faith.

I have suggested before that Christianity is not a system of beliefs or a particular way of thinking; so much as it is a way of living. A Christian is not, I think, one who simply asserts certain claims about God, often without knowing or understanding what one is saying; a Christian is someone who lives out his or her life day by day consciously struggling to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves.

For is not the truth this, that the early Christian community believed in God, our Father in heaven, who had created the heavens and the earth; and also in a certain man, Jesus of Nazareth, whom they deemed to a special relationship with this God; and that furthermore a Divine Spirit was somehow still alive with that community and guided it. This was the very essence of the Christian understanding, this was where you began as a Christian, not ended. The Trinity was not a thing to be understood, it is not a complex idea to be grasped, but a simple mystery to be experienced. It is the Christian Mystery, every Christian's spiritual foundation, which our feeble human minds ultimately cannot fathom, and our hearts cannot comprehend.

The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, reminded the Church last century of a spiritual law which it seems to have forgotten: that religious experience must always precede theological interpretation, and not vice versa. We should therefore spend more time trying to experience God in our lives, than in trying to understand and define who God is. For Christians, Jesus is experienced as a unique reflection of the Mystery of God, that somehow makes God more real and accessible to us. Our words and phrases and feeble doctrines cannot articulate the Truth about all of this, they can only hint at it. For in the end God does, and must, remain a mystery, not to be understood, but to be experienced. AMEN.