

ARIANISM: GOD IS THREE

Mark 12:28 "And one of the scribes came up and heard (Jesus and the Sadducees) disputing with one another, and seeing that (Jesus) answered them well, asked him, '(Lord) Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is (this), '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 soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'".

In answer to the scribe's question, Jesus repeated the famous Jewish statement of faith from Deuteronomy, known as the "Shema," or the "Shema Israel;" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." As I mentioned on Trinity Sunday, observant Jews for millennia now have recited this creedal verse every day in their prayers, when they lie down and when they rise up, when they come in and when they go out. These very verses are inscribed on parchment placed inside the mezuzahs on the doorposts of your Jewish friends. That belief in one God, a jealous God, and thou shall have no other god beside Him, says the Ten Commandments, is perhaps the feature that most distinguished Judaism from all other ancient religions.

Early Christians sought to preserve this monotheistic tradition in the Church while remaining true to the Christian

experience of the Resurrected Jesus. As you heard in the first three sermons of this series in those great Christological controversies of the first centuries of the early Church, the divinity of Jesus was rarely questioned and often enhanced, while the reality of his humanity was sometimes limited or denied! And if Jesus was seen as so divine, how did those early Christians reconcile the monotheism of their Hebraic heritage? Thus began the great Trinitarian debates of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. How can we believe in Jesus' divinity and yet be faithful to our belief in one God? It is a question with which Christians sometimes still struggle today.

There were, of course, many different attempts to answer these concerns in the early Church. For example, the Bishop of Antioch in the middle of the second century, Paul of Samosata, affirmed the Hebraic ideal of one God in what was later called "Adoptionism," where Jesus was one born a mere man, but that he was infused with the divine Logos at his baptism in the river Jordan. Jesus became then the Word of God incarnate, proclaimed or 'adopted' by God as His Son. Hence, Jesus was seen not so much as God-become-man but as man-become-God. Indeed, in some early Gospel manuscripts, the voice from heaven at Jesus baptism declared the phrase from the Psalms that goes, "You are my Son, this day have I begotten you!" There is then only one true God, the Father --- though there is no other person like unto Jesus,

the anointed one, the Christ. The Hebraic tradition of monotheism was thus preserved, argued Paul of Samosata, as was the uniqueness and divinity of Jesus. And yet three different synods in his own Antioch condemned his teachings as insufficient in declaring the divinity of Jesus, and he was deposed as their Bishop in 268. The later Council of Nicaea, some 75 years later, specifically required that his followers be rebaptized before being received back into the Church.

Back in Rome another group of theologians tried to safeguard the monotheism of Christianity in a different way. They claimed that there was only one God, but that He could choose to manifest Himself in different ways or modes. This teaching was called either Modalism or Sabellianism, after Sabellius, a priest in Rome at the beginning of the third century. Now according to Sabellius, the three persons of the Christian Trinity were not separate realities, but merely different modes or appearances to humanity of the one true God. Revealing Himself first in the Torah as Creator, God is called the Father. Then in the New Testament as the Incarnate Redeemer, God is called the Son, and then lastly as the Paraclete, the Comforter, He is called the Holy Spirit. But they are all really the same Person, for there can be of course only one God, but He can reveal Himself in different ways with different 'faces.' This one God thus became incarnate in person of Jesus, whose

divinity is thus unquestionable. ---- An obvious question for Sabellians, though, is that if Jesus was really just God the Father in a different form, then to whom did Jesus pray? Callistus, Bishop of Rome, condemned the Sabellians in 220, but their teaching continued to flourish in the Eastern church for the next three hundred years.

In opposition to Sabellianism, a young priest in Alexandria at the beginning of the fourth century named Arius, who had trained at the famous Catechetical School in Antioch, maintained the Hebraic monotheism of the Church in yet another way. Arius taught that the Son of God had been begotten by God the Father *before* the creation of the world. Indeed, the world was created through Jesus, but Jesus was still an offspring of God, the Son of God. Therefore, the Son of God was made God by God the Father, the Son was divine, yet Arius stressed that the son is not equal to the father, the one true God. Arius' bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, had Arius' teachings officially condemned at a local synod and Arius was excommunicated. But the controversy quickly spread, and Arius found supporters of his views among many of the leaders of the Church. Though Arius was accused by his opponents of being too liberal and too loose in his theology, engaging in heresy (as defined by his opponents), many historians argue that Arius was actually quite

conservative, and that he deplored how, in his view, Christian theology was being too freely mixed with Greek paganism.

The Emperor Constantine, himself newly converted to Christianity, wrote letters and sent emissaries trying to settle this now widespread dispute. When that failed, Constantine called the first great Ecumenical Council of the Church, at Nicaea in 325, to settle these matters. The opponents of Arius rallied around a young deacon from Alexandria, named Athanasius, who insisted that the Son with the Father must be seen as eternal and equal. But that is polytheism, said the Arians, acceptable perhaps to the Greeks in the Church, but not to any Jewish Christian tradition. The Council of Nicaea nonetheless issued a shorter version of what we call the Nicene Creed, but one still aimed specifically at opposing Arius and his followers, who were then banished and exiled.

However, that was by no means the end of the story. Arius had many friends and supporters in the House of Bishops, and at the Imperial Court in Constantinople. After Constantine's death two years later in 337, the new Emperor of the East, Constantius, soon openly embraced Arianism. Athanasius was forced to flee to Rome, where the Nicene Christians were protected by the Western Emperor, Constans. But within a few years Constans was dead, leaving the Arian Constantius as the sole ruler, and Arianism as the official form of Christianity

for the whole Roman Empire! Athanasius died before the matter was further debated at the second great Ecumenical Council, this time at Constantinople, in 381. This Council accepted an expansion of the Creed from Nicaea, which is the Creed we call today as the Nicene Creed. This creed clearly affirmed a belief in one God, existing as three Persons, but of one substance, however that works out.

For the differences between the parties were by this time extremely technical, depending on occasion upon the acceptance or rejection of single words, and sometimes even single syllables. At Nicaea, for instance, Athanasius had proposed the Greek word "homoousios" (homo **uuse** eos,) to express the relationship between the Father and the Son, a word which was included in the Nicene Creed and is translated now "of one being (with the Father)." It was a difficult word for the Arians to accept because it had been condemned as heretical when Paul of Samosata had used it. The Arians agreed with the phrases "only begotten" or "first born of all creation," even "God of God," meaning "made God by God," but the Arians could not accept the term "homoousios (homo **uuse** eos)" (ὁμοούσιος) to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son. They could not affirm the Son as being of one substance with the Father, because that would make them substantially the same, that would make Jesus coeternal and coequal with the Father, differing only

in personality or relation, which in the eyes of the Arians either denied the Hebraic monotheism of the Church, or sounded too much like Sabellianism to them.

Eventually the Arian camp itself split over language into three groups. The extremists preferred the word, "anomoious (anomo e use)," (ἀνομοίους) meaning "dissimilar," to stress the difference between the Father and the Son; no Modalism here. The middle party promoted the ambiguous word, "homoious (homo e use)," (ὁμοούσιον) meaning "similar," but aimed at avoiding any dogmatic precision by affirming simply that the Son is of similar substance with the Father without saying how. Finally, the third group, known as the semi-Arians, pressed for "homoiousios (homo **ou** seos)," (ὁμοιούσιος) the same word as Athanasius had used but with a diphthong, and thus meaning "of like substance," but not "of one substance," meaning that Jesus was of like substance with God the Father, just as a natural son is of "like substance" of his earthly father, but not 'exactly of the same substance.' But this was not enough for the Nicene Christians, who insisted that the Son had to be seen as "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. . ."

The Arians could accept all of those phrases except for one syllable of one word, and as a result they were expelled from

the Church as arch-heretics and banished from the Empire, so the Arians became evangelists among the barbarian tribes to the north, converting most of what we call Portugal, Spain, and much of southern France. Back in the Roman Empire, the Nicene Creed became the standard formula for orthodoxy even though it went far beyond our Hebraic tradition and the biblical concepts of the New Testament. The Nicene Creed was in its day not a unifying force as we tend to think of it today, but a divisive one. It was the principal weapon used to suppress much lively thinking and discussion of the Christian faith within the Church. And it is remains so today.

In the end our feeble human minds cannot fathom, and our hearts cannot comprehend the mystery of God. For Christians, Jesus is a unique reflection of that mystery, and somehow makes God more real and accessible to us. But trying to define in exactly what way that happens always runs the risk of dividing the people rather than uniting them. Our words and phrases cannot articulate the Truth, they can only hint at it. Many of the so-called "heretics" of the Early Church were earnest and pious Christians struggling to understand their faith in far deeper ways than you and I. We should, therefore, be slow in condemning them, remembering always that none of us ever gets it quite right in the end, for God always remains a mystery, not for us to comprehend, but for us to behold. AMEN.