

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

There is no doubt. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is difficult—difficult to know, impossible to understand. If you read my article in the Voice, you know that I addressed it there, speaking against what an *“emeritus professor of philosophy and religion”* had to say about understanding the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. He says we can understand it, and proceeded to assert the ancient heresy of modalism. Lutherans say, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a mystery. We can only confess it, as we just did in the Athanasian Creed: that *“we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance”*; that *“the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is another. But the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.”*

And this is not just some esoteric doctrine of little importance to the life of the church. No! We must believe in this God in order to be saved, and apart from holding to this *“catholic faith,”* that is, the *“faith once delivered to the saints,”* we will *“without doubt perish eternally.”*

And the way to do that, that is, to believe this doctrine, is to listen to Jesus. We know that Jesus was thoroughly Trinitarian. It’s true that last week, our focus was on the Feast of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, but in last week’s Gospel, Jesus spoke with Trinitarian language. Remember? *“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”*—there’s Father and Son. And then a bit later, *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you”*—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And we listen to Peter and the apostles. Peter’s Pentecost Day sermon that we heard another portion of today was thoroughly Trinitarian. Did you hear it? *“This Jesus God raised up, [that’s God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead] and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing”*—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So the apostles taught it and Jesus taught it. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity is not of little importance to the Christian Church. Indeed, the early centuries of the Church were embroiled in battles over how to talk about Jesus and His place in the Godhead. I mean, if it’s about Jesus, it’s at the very center of our faith. Thus, also, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not just some abstract teaching of the church. It is, in large measure, all about Jesus. Thus, we not only hear Jesus

talk of the Father today, but we also hear Him instruct us about who He is. And He affirms: He is God.

Now John in chapter 8 records a rather intense conversation Jesus was having with the Jews. Jesus had told them, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* He told them, *“if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* He told them, *“I know that ... you seek to kill me.”* He told them, *“God is not your father, or else you would love me, and you would listen to my word.”* *“You are of your father the devil.”* Thus, the Jews responded by accusing Jesus of being a Samaritan and having a demon.

Jesus isn't done. Of course, He denies having a demon. And then He goes on to say, *“if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”* How extraordinary! Who can say such a thing? Who do you think you are, Jesus? Or as our text translates it, *“Who do you make yourself out to be?”*

One thing the Jews were sure of—Jesus who stood there before them was a man, and surely we affirm this, too. But they thought, surely no ordinary man would have the audacity claim an honor equal to father Abraham, or even to one of the prophets. And they died. *“Who are you, Jesus, to say to us, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death’? Are you greater than they? Are you saying that you, a man, hold the power over life and death, when Solomon wrote, ‘No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death’?”*

They were, in a way, getting it. Jesus surely was a man standing there before them, but much more than a man. That's what He was claiming. So when Jesus talked about *“my Father,”* He was claiming a sonship of His Father in heaven different than ours. His sonship was more than a camaraderie with us and our status as children of the Father, born of God, born from above by water and the Spirit. Jesus is the eternal Son from heaven, who came down from the Father's side as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. Thus Jesus knew the Father as He who is One with the Father, as we heard in recent weeks. *“I and the Father are one.”* Or again, *“just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.”*

Jesus was indeed greater than the Jews' father Abraham, for He was before Abraham. And Abraham looked forward to His coming—not just for the birth of Isaac, but for the birth of the offspring promised to Eve who would crush the ancient serpent's head, the birth of the offspring promised to Abraham through whom all families of the earth would be blessed, and the birth of the offspring who would later be promised to David and who would reign in an everlasting kingdom.

But more than that, Jesus was greater than father Abraham because Jesus was also Abraham's God and Lord—his Savior. Jesus said to the Jews, "*Before Abraham was, I AM.*" Many of you, perhaps most of you, know that when Jesus said, "*I AM,*" He was using for Himself the Divine name of the Lord given to Moses at the burning bush: "*God said to Moses, 'I AM who I AM.' ... Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, [I AM] the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name ...*"

The Jews understood what He was saying to them: this man was claiming to be THEIR God and Lord, their Savior. What utter blasphemy! And they picked up stones to kill Him.

Jesus did claim to be God, by promising Divine things — "*if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death*" — by explicit declaration of His Divinity — "*I AM*" — and although it could have happened in a less-than-miraculous way, I say by a use of His Divine powers, as He had done in His hometown of Nazareth, passing through an angry crowd then — here "*Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.*"

The Jews were unsuccessful on this occasion. It was not His hour to die. Jesus would permit it when the time was right, but it would have to be done as He had foretold: lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness, cursed, "*a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people*"; mocked and taunted; hanging from a cross, His life poured out like water, His bones hanging out of joint. For what had Jesus said just moments before? "*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM.*" And the soldiers, watching at the foot of the cross, confessed, "*Truly this [man] was the Son of God!*"

This is what we confess on this day: that the Son of God, God Himself, "*emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*" And we confess that "*he humbled himself by*" being lifted up, "*becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*" That's how we know Jesus is the great "*I AM*" — our Savior. That's why we confess on this Trinity Sunday and every Sunday that God the Father raised Him up and "*highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is [the I AM] Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

Which is why this doctrine is no insignificant, abstract doctrine of the church, for we are reminded that the only way we know the loving Father is by the Son's revelation, and the only way we come to the Father is through the beloved Son, and the only way to look to the Son and believe in Him is by the Spirit working

through the word and water, through bread and wine, establishing us in Christ, anointing us, clothing us with the love that binds all things together in perfect harmony.

Why is all this important? Because the only true God, the Holy Trinity, distinguishes Himself from the false gods in this way: He is not the God who says “do” but the God who says “*It’s done. Out of our love, we created you, we redeemed you, we sanctify you. We do it together: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity.*” God grant you steadfastness in this catholic faith—so difficult to understand that it confounds the wise and understanding, but so easy to confess that God reveals it to the little children. Yes, Lord give us the simple faith of a child baptized ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.