

## Knowing God Through the Person of Christ

---

At the heart of Christianity is the cross, and the One who was executed on it: the Lord Jesus Christ. But who was this man? - for whatever else we believe about him, he was certainly a man. The earliest witnesses to Jesus, which we find in the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, make all sorts of suggestions: a prophet, 'The Prophet,' Son of Man, Son of God, Word of God, the Wisdom and Power of God.

The Gospels present Jesus as a teacher, a wonderworker, one who came to be considered (in ways not really explored in the Gospels, save for his opposition to those called 'Pharisees') a threat: a threat to the Jewish religion, in some sense, and beyond that a political threat (that he was crucified makes clear that the execution was performed by the Roman occupiers of Palestine).

But how did Jesus think of himself? In what way did he want to be remembered? As a prophet and teacher, he preached; parables seem to have characterized his teaching. But what did he teach? There is not a great deal in his teaching that cannot be paralleled in contemporary or earlier Jewish teaching. Even the twofold command - to love God and to love one's neighbor - is presented in St. Luke's Gospel, not as Jesus' teaching, but as a summary of the Law provided by a Jewish lawyer in answer to Jesus' question (Luke 10:27). Jesus is not presented as a great teacher with a new message: he speaks with a new authority, but what he preaches is the message of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus is not a philosopher with some new interpretation of the universe, nor is he presented as a moral teacher with a new moral code, though it is true that love is central to the way he presented his teaching, and this is echoed in the apostolic witness to Christ - not least in the presentation of Jesus in the Gospel of St. John and in the letters of St. Paul.

This sense that Jesus cannot be summed up in this teaching, whether philosophical or moral, is underlined by the fact that he wrote nothing himself; though this aligns him with another mysterious person, this time in the Greek tradition, Socrates. But in two ways Jesus gave his disciples something to remember him by.

When the disciples asked him how to pray, he gave them the Lord's Prayer, the 'Our Father'; and on the night before he suffered, he asked his disciples to remember him by gathering together to break bread and share wine, receiving them as his body and blood.

This seems to be very significant for any attempt to develop a Christian understanding of God. Had Jesus presented himself as a philosopher, then we would naturally have looked to him for teaching on the nature of God and his relationship to the world, the nature of divine providence and so on. Had Jesus presented himself primarily as a moral teacher, then we would not be surprised if his notion of God turned on how God is a source of moral values, moral commandments and so on. And in the tradition of Western philosophy, going right back to Plato, we can see the way God has been invoked as the first cause, the ultimate explanation of everything, or as One who underwrites our moral values, either by issuing divine commandments for us to observe, or as himself the 'Form of the God', or as the One who as Creator understands in a fundamental way human nature, so that from that understanding there can be derived a set of moral values, or a natural law.

All this might well be very important, and certainly a great deal of human thought has been devoted to understanding how God is the ultimate meaning of the universe or the ultimate source of moral values. But the ways Jesus wanted his disciples to remember him seem to suggest a different way of approaching the mystery of God. The Lord's Prayer first and foremost teaches us that God is the One to whom we pray; he is not some ultimate principle or final value, but one to whom we can address our prayers, one with whom we can enter into a relationship. We call him 'Father'; we are his children, his sons and daughters.

The Lord's Prayer is said or sung at all the services of the Church. It has a central place in the Divine Liturgy: introducing the receiving of Holy Communion in the body and blood of Christ, and preceded by the eucharistic prayer, the Anaphora ('offering' prayer in which we address God, give thanks to him for all that he has given

us whether 'known or unknown, manifest or hidden', recall his institution of the Holy Eucharist and call upon the Holy Spirit to come upon us and the gifts of bread and wine and transform them into the Holy body and blood of Christ, and then, in the very presence of Christ, beseech him for the Church and the world. It is the Church's prayer *par excellence*.

If God is the one to whom we pray, it is a natural question to ask: How do we speak about God in the central prayer of the Divine Liturgy? The longer of the two eucharistic prayers that we use during the Great Fast, the anaphora of St. Basil, begins thus:

Master, the One who is, Lord God, father Almighty, who are to be worshipped, it is truly right and fitting, and becomes the majesty of your holiness to praise you, to hymn you, to worship you, to thank you, to glorify you, who alone are truly God; to offer you with a broken heart and a spirit of humility this our reasonable worship.

As the prayer goes on, we realize that we stand before God and address him in praise. We take on our lips the words and phrases of the Scriptures: from the initial words, expressing Jeremias' words of wonder and going on to express the majesty and mystery of God, whom we know as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer then unfolds, using scriptural terminology, the mystery of the Trinity - in which the Father is manifest in the Son and the Spirit. The prayer continues, evoking Isaiah' vision in the Temple of the worship of God by the angelic powers of heaven. We truly recall that it is through creation by God himself that we stand before God and are included in the prayer and praise of the powers of heaven.

What this prayer teaches and exemplifies is that we stand before God, taking from his own revelation the words and phrases with which we address him. We address him as he has revealed himself - in mystery and majesty, beyond any human conception - and also as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, again expressed in words and phrases drawn from the Scriptures themselves. What the Scriptures have given us a way of addressing God, a way that matches something of the glory of his nature, but not a way of defining him.

It is something like this that St. Maximos the Confessor develops in his short treatise on the

*Our Father*. The petitions of the Lord's Prayer constitute a theology, but it is theology of a particular sort. As Maximos puts it:

For hidden within a limited compass this prayer contains the whole purpose and aim - the divine counsel whose purpose is the deification of our nature. The prayer includes petitions for everything that the divine Word effected through his self-emptying in the Incarnation, and it teaches us to strive for those blessings of which the true provider is God the Father alone through the natural mediation of the Son in the Holy Spirit....

Maximos goes on to discuss the seven mysteries contained in the prayer: 'theology, adoption of sons by grace, equality with the angels, participation in eternal life, the restoration of human nature, the abolition of the law of sin, and the destruction of the tyranny of the evil one'. These are not just mysteries to contemplate, still less to solve; they are mysteries that draw us into communion with God. They reveal the mystery of the Trinity (which is what Maximos means by 'theology'), and that this opens up to us the possibility of adoption as sons and daughters in the Son, Christ. This state of adoption grants us equality with the angels ('on earth, as in heaven'). We participate in the divine life through making Christ himself our food in the Holy Eucharist. Human nature is enhanced. We are separated from one another, opposed to each other - growth in the spirit is accomplished and takes place through forgiveness ('Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'). But life on earth remains a constant struggle against evil; we recognize this as we pray for deliverance from temptation. And we seek deliverance from the power of that which distracts us from God.

Because these mysteries are about our transformation into God, deification, they are presented to us in the Lord's Prayer as petitions, expressions of our desire, or perhaps better, to use a phrase of Thomas Aquinas, as interpreting our desire. Maximos sees this desire as a response to God's love for us, in particular, God's love for us manifest in the Incarnation and self-emptying of the Son of God, and a response that demands of us a similar self-emptying: moreover, by emptying ourselves of the passions, we lay hold of the divine to the same degree, that, by deliberately emptying Himself of

his own sublime glory, the Word of God truly became man.

If we turn to God in prayer, we expect him to listen, to hear our prayers. What we might mean by that is a mystery - and mystery, in the sense not of a puzzle to solve but something of which we have some understanding, but an even deeper sense that such understanding will never be exhaustive, there will always be more to say. But it at least means that we can be attentive to God and expect his attention to us. In some way prayer opens up a personal relationship; prayer is an activity only open to persons, and can only be addressed to a person. So, if we think of God as one to whom we pray, we are thinking of God in personal terms. It is expressed in this manner rather than saying "as a person", for two reasons. First of all, the notion of a person is quite a slippery notion when you think about what is meant that human beings are persons created 'in God's image'. Second, do we Christians think of God as 'a' person? Don't we in fact think of God as a Trinity of Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How did Christians come by the notion of the Trinity?

The word 'trinity', from the Latin *trinitas*, means a set of three, not a random set of three, but three things that in some way belong together. The set of three to which the Trinity refers is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Son is the Lord Jesus Christ, who prays to God as his Father; the Holy Spirit is a mysterious presence of God, experienced in the Christian Church. There is, and remains in Greek theology in particular, a sense that 'God' is the Father; a common expression in Greek theology in the fourth and fifth centuries, and indeed later, speaks of *ho Theos kai Pater*, 'the God and Father', often translated rather lazily, as "God the Father." So there is a very strong sense in the New Testament and in later Greek theology that 'God', *ho Theos*, refers to the Father. This usage makes clear that the monotheism of the Hebrews is something affirmed, not qualified, by the Christian faith. What happened - very quickly, within decades of the crucifixion of Christ - is that Christ is seen as ranked with the God and Father as God, and (perhaps less clearly) the Holy Spirit too.

There are several events in the Gospels where the Trinitarian nature of God is revealed:

examples are the baptism of Christ, the Transfiguration, and the agony in the garden. At Christ's baptism, as the Lord ascends from the waters, the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends on him in the form of a dove and there is heard the voice of the Father saying, 'You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. The Eastern Church celebrates the baptism of Christ on the Feast of the Theophany, the manifestation of God. In the icon of the baptism, or Theophany, the Trinity is intimated in the man, the dove and the Father's blessing.

We pray on that day that the *worship* of the Trinity was revealed in this feast, not the doctrine. As we contemplate the mystery of Christ's baptism we are drawn to worship the Holy Trinity, who enlightens the world through the Incarnate Son.

At the Transfiguration Christ appeared to the inner three of the disciples - Peter, James and John - transfigured in his glory and accompanied by the prophets Moses and Elias. Again there is a voice from heaven, the voice of the Father saying, 'This is my Beloved Son'; again the Spirit appears, this time in the form of the cloud that descends on the scene, from which the voice is heard - the cloud of the divine presence, the *Shekinah*, that filled the tabernacle in the Old Testament. This time, however, what is manifest is principally that the Son belongs to the Holy Trinity, and therefore that it is as God that Christ is going to his voluntary passion: on the cross, 'one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh', in a phrase that became popular from the fifth century onwards. The *Kondak* of the feast interprets its meaning in these words:

You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ our God, and Your Disciples beheld as much as they could of Your glory, so that when they would see You crucified, they would understand that You suffered willingly; and they would preach to the world that You are truly the reflection of the Father.

Throughout Great and Holy Week, it is made clear that Christ's suffering was voluntary; in the anaphora of St. John Chrysostom this is expressed by "on the night when He was betrayed, or rather, when He surrendered Himself for the life of the world." And this is made clear in the mystery of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ withdrew with the

inner three of the disciples to pray to the Father. To his disciples he says, 'my soul is greatly troubled, even unto death'; to his Father, he prays, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you'.

It is here that we see most clearly what it was that compelled Christians to think of the One God in terms of the Holy Trinity. For in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Father and the Son are clearly distinct. All three persons of the Trinity are involved in the crucifixion as an act of redeeming love, but they are clearly distinct. And that distinction, as the prayer in Gethsemane makes clear, is articulated *through prayer*. It is the Son's prayer to the Father that makes clear the distinction - the *personal* distinction - between Father and the Son.

But there is a dual character to the Son's prayer to the Father, for the Son prays to the Father both as God the Son and as the Incarnate Son: his prayer allows us to glimpse something of the nature both of the relationship within the Divine Trinity as Christ prays to the Father as his Son, and of his relationship to us as Christ prays to God the Father, as the Son, the 'firstborn among many brethren'. There is one person praying - the Incarnate Son of God (there is no separate human person) - But his prayer expresses a dual filial relationship: the relationship of the human sonship that God the Son assumed in the Incarnation, a relationship into which we are incorporated by the adoption as sons and daughters that is effected in baptism.

We can see something of this duality in the Gospels. All the Gospels refer to Jesus' prayer to his Father; Jesus is depicted as spending whole nights alone in prayer to God who is his Father. But there are other passages where Christ is, as it were, assimilated to God; we are not so much expected to enter into his prayer, as to pray to him, to find in Jesus the Lord the source of succor and salvation. An example is the passage in St. Matthew's Gospel, where the Lord says: 'Come to me, all that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest for your souls'.

This realization of the dual aspect of Christ—leading us in prayer to God, and also being the

One to whom we pray, as 'one of the Trinity' - needs to further explored. The way in which a relationship within the Godhead between Father and Son, articulated in prayer, brought about a realization of God as Trinity.

What has been said only makes clear a relationship between the Father and the Son; What about the Holy Spirit? The realization that the One Godhead embraced three persons in relationship, may have taken centuries to articulate in the language that the Church later regarded as canonical; nevertheless that realization seems to be aboriginal.

But what about the Holy Spirit? The language about the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures is much less straightforward; sometimes it seems to be a matter of someone personal, but on other occasions the language seems more general, referring to the divine present or activity. First, however, we must make one thing clear. What has been outlined is not, in any sense, a *proof* of the relationship between Father and Son in the Trinity, certainly not in the sense of explaining why there are Father and Son in the Trinity. It is a point frequently made by the Fathers that we cannot answer the question "Why?" in relation to the Godhead. Only in matters concerning the created order can we hope to answer this question, and not always then. All we can hope to do is catch some glimpse of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, but we shall never understand it. The case of the Holy Spirit may well be more mysterious. It does not make it less important.

There are, however, some things we can say even now. First, as Fathers such as St. Athanasios and St. Basil pointed out, when the divinity of the Holy Spirit was called in question in the fourth century, the role of the Spirit is to effect His presence in those who believe. This is deification. All of the sacraments are made efficacious through the power of the Holy Spirit. None of this would make sense if the Holy Spirit did not belong to the Holy Trinity. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit comes in answer to prayer, to his being invoked, which would only make sense if he, too, were personal. And, perhaps most significant, the Holy Spirit is invoked in Christian worship alongside the Father and the Son (e.g., baptism is in the name of the Father, Son and Holy). Christian worship is addressed to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit -

or, more briefly, to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. "Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit" is one of the most frequent phrases in Eastern Christian worship. It is in what appear to be liturgical passages, preserved in the early writings of the Church, including the New Testament, that we find the most consistent witness to the Trinity; the earliest Christian hymn we know: "O gladsome light" is Trinitarian in both structure and meaning.

Gradually the Church developed a terminology in which to express her understanding of God, the Holy Trinity, one God in three persons. It was because of the Church's attempt to understand who Jesus is that this development came about.

The belief in God as a Triune relationship of Three persons where one of the Persons also has a human nature, connects us human beings in a very intimate way to the Godhead. When we understand the Incarnation of God in the Person of Jesus, we begin to understand how human nature is intimately connected to God.

Can we prove this? No! But we can believe it and it makes a lot of sense. When we look at the life of Jesus, we see that He had a deep connection with God. When we believe that that He also "rose from the dead", we have a clear indication that He is God incarnate.

*So it is through our understanding of the Son, Christ, that we come to know God. God chose to reveal Himself to humankind through the Person of Christ Who is God incarnate in the Person of the Son. This also means that the way the Son lived and thought is an example of how God intends humans to live and think in order to truly become God's children.*