

When I was in seminary over 40 years ago, I read a book, I think it may have been by the Swiss Theologian Karl Barth, that made a point that has stayed with me for all the years since through many changes in life, career, and location. The point was basically all you can say about God is, "God is". In grammatical terms just the subject, "God", and just the first person, singular, present tense, copular verb "is". Copular verbs normally link a subject to a complement. For example I might say "the weather is fine". I link the subject weather to the complement fine, or awful, or normal. The problem the author of that work I read long ago raised was as soon as you add a complement to the subject/verb combination of God is, you limit God. For example I could say God is King, but that both limits God and enshrines earthly kings by association. Just as I if I said God is judge, or teacher, or wise, or unchanging. God is all those things and so many more. Our attempts to describe what God is, inevitably limit our sense of God more than those attempts describe God.

Every time we attempt to describe God we essentially end up anthropomorphizing God. We usually think of anthropomorphizing as something we do to animals imagining that they have human feelings. Disney has made several fortunes so anthropomorphizing; think of Mickey Mouse, Jiminy Cricket, Donald Duck, Bambi, etc. Essentially we make the objects of our anthropomorphizing more than they ever could be. But when we make God the object of our anthropomorphizing, we make God substantially less than God is. And we risk making human versions of the terms we use more than they are.

Paul Tillich a German/American theologian in the mid 20th century went further. He said that God is beyond existence; that he was before existence; that he is not a supernatural being among other beings: he is being itself. Tillich uses words like "absolute", "unconditional", "ultimate", "infinite", "eternal" when speaking of God. But Barth said that theology should focus on God's self-revelation in Jesus rather than on human-based speculation. "One cannot speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice". How is this connected to our reading from John this evening?

Throughout human history going back multiple millennia, humans have tried ways to describe their sense of the sacred, the life-force that is more than simple human life. We are a curious species. More often than not, those ways of describing the sacred have strayed into anthropomorphizing because in our many different cultures, we only have what we know and the language we have. We struggle to live with a strong visceral awareness of the sacred, of the more, without diminishing that more by seeking definition. But we cannot define something for which we have such a limited grasp. What is indubitably true is that every culture shares a need to reach for the numinous. That we express that for which we reach differently is so much less important than realizing that we are all reaching.

Our passage from John this evening is a brilliant summation of what in John's time was an early expression of the nature of God that in time became our belief in the Trinity. There is one God in three distinct, co-eternal, and co-equal persons, sharing the same divine essence but with unique roles. They are not parts of God but are fully God individually, a concept often described as one in essence (what God is) and three in person (who God is). I got these words from Father Google's AI

function, but I think them absolutely apt. So to be clear the Logos or the Son was coequal with the Father, and with the Spirit sharing the one essence. Hence Karl Barth's insistence that for greater knowledge of God, we have to look at the incarnate God in Jesus.

In our passage, John presents the budding trinitarian theology with a hierarchal flavour only in that in his time, fathers were of greater authority than sons. But perhaps the most important lines in our passage are: *For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself....* While the Spirit is missing from our reading this evening, the Spirit in the Gospel of John is introduced as we have heard during the previous two weeks as John the Baptist sees the spirit descend on Jesus and remain.

Our credal statements about the three in one and one in three, were not fully formed into forms we would recognize from our worship services for more than two centuries after John wrote his Gospel. The Nicene Creed which we still commonly use today was initially developed at the Council of Nicea in 325 and later expanded and confirmed in the Council of Constantinople in 381. If you study early church history you will read of endless controversy and division in understanding who God is, as well as a mind-numbing list of complex Greek terms to describe a near limitless set of views that eventually were branded heresies: Arianism, Pelagianism, Docetism, Montanism, Monophysitism, Subordinationism, and Antinomianism are only a few. Some I chose not to include were so polysyllabic, I hadn't a hope of being able to pronounce them. These controversies lamentably provoked wars and persecutions. And do not imagine that division ended with the two Councils and the formulation of the authoritative version of the Creed. It continues to the present day. Among the many issues that caused the split between Western and Eastern Christianity in 1054 was the issue known as the *Filioque Clause*. If you look at the Nicene Creed in a copy of the Book of Common Prayer you will see the creed addresses the Holy Spirit thusly: *And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord, The Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son*. Well this part of this language is an anathema to the Orthodox Church. The Spirit proceeded only from the Father, not the Father and the Son. In the BAS the Filioque Clause (and the son) was retained, but I have often seen it dropped in Anglican liturgies when the creed is printed in the bulletin.

Why have I gone on so long about these controversies of old. Well in truth because they are not over. Their on-going nature is both bad news and good news. It is bad news when differences in perception lead to division and violence as it has all too often in the past. It is good news in that it shows that reaching towards God continues to be a vibrant human activity. It is good news when the reaching recognizes that the goal is greater connection even though full and complete understanding in this life will continue to be unattainable. We will never fully reach God leave alone fully understand God. Reaching towards God when it is conducted with love towards God and neighbour – especially love towards those whose reaching may be different than ours – is what gives this life meaning. It is good news when the reaching recognizes that when one reaches into a mystery one will encounter deeper mysteries that can only deepen and broaden ones sense of what it is to be a child of God. May we all continue the reach. Amen