

## Is Jesus God?.....What do you think.....really??

Trinity Sunday - May 30, 2010

A southern Baptist minister was completing a temperance sermon. With great emphasis he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." With even greater emphasis he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." And then finally, shaking his fist in the air, he said, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." Sermon complete, he then sat down. The song leader stood very cautiously and announced with a smile, "For our closing song, let us sing Hymn #365, Shall We Gather at the River."

Today is Trinity Sunday and, as such, we are invited to think about the doctrine of the Trinity as it was formulated in the 4th century and expressed in the Nicene Creed, that is, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I hope to accomplish the following: (1) to invite us to think openly and honestly about Jesus of Nazareth; was he a brilliant rabbi, or was he God, or was he something in-between?; (2) to point to the wide diversity of ideas and ways of describing Jesus which occurred during the first four centuries of the Church; (3) to suggest what each of us thinks and believes about Jesus is immensely personal and, therefore, should not & cannot be dictated or controlled by any external authority; and (4) to recommend the Christian community shift away from its historical insistence on theological conformity toward a culture of theological and intellectual pluralism in which diversity and difference are seen as enriching & exciting instead of threatening.

**Mark 8:27-33:** *"And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesare'a Philip'pi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that I am?' And they told him, 'John the Baptist; and others say, Eli'jah; and others one of the prophets.' And he asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"* BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?....This is the question the Feast of the Trinity shoves right in our faces. It is a deeply significant and personal question; a question that calls as much upon our willingness to fall in love and to give our lives to another as upon our intellectual abilities. "Who do you say that I am?....The question of the identity of Jesus and his relationship with God began to be debated while he was still alive and the debate continues into the present. For a long time, I thought the answer was simple and there had never been and was not now any serious differences of opinion. I have since discovered the answer is anything but simple and there always has been and probably always will be a wide range of different ideas and beliefs on the subject.

Let's briefly dip our toe into the waters of history to get a flavor of this extensive diversity.

**(1)** The earliest writings we have about the nature of Jesus are those of **St. Paul dated about 20 years** after the death of Jesus. While there is disagreement about how to interpret Paul, it is pretty safe to say Paul saw Jesus as fully human, yet sinless and also, the "first-born" in Whom, and by Whom, and for Whom all things were made. (See Colossians)

**(2)** The **Gospel of Mark** appears **about 45 years** after Jesus and seems to place sharp emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. There are no Virgin Birth nor Resurrection stories in Mark. The humanity of Jesus is seen in his suffering. In fact, the suffering of Jesus is the key to understanding Jesus' true identity as the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Chosen One of God.

**(3)** The **Gospel of John**, written approximately **60 years** after Jesus, gives Jesus a huge "promotion" relative to Mark by applying a common Greek concept, "the Logos," to Jesus. In John, Jesus is the co-eternal Word of God in human form....a human being like no other and also an entity who was both with God and also the same as the God who created the universe.

**(4)** About **100 years** after Jesus, **Cerinthus** wrote the person of Jesus contained both a human nature and a separate divine nature. The spiritual being or divine nature of Jesus descended on him during his baptism in the Jordan.

**(5)** **150 years** after Jesus, the **Docetists** believed Jesus' physical body was an illusion. Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die.

**(6)** About **200 years** after Jesus, **Sabellius** taught that Jesus had a human body but was identical to God in his nature: he had no real human nature. In this view, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not persons, but three different modes of one divine being.

**(7)** And approximately **300 years** after Jesus, **Arius** argued that *"if the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident, that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he [the Son] had his substance from nothing."* In other words, Jesus was undoubtedly a special creation of God, but he was not the same as God.

These few examples give us some sense of the variety of approaches used to understand the experience of the Sacred in and through and all around Jesus as well as the variety of conclusions those approaches birthed. In fact, so great were the differences and so intense were the disagreements in the fourth century Church, the Roman Emperor Constantine feared for the unity of the empire. He wanted to get control of what he considered as unhelpful theological pluralism. He convened the Council of Nicea in 325 and the **result of that Council was two-fold:** **(1)** The Doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine which declared Jesus was and is God along with and as much as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit; and **(2)** the requirement that all Christians agree and give assent to this idea. Following the Council of Nicea and its requirement that Jesus be understood to be the third member of the Godhead, the movement toward an enforced "orthodoxy" with its abandonment and suppression of the spirit of theological pluralism intensified. Now everyone was to think the same way or at least say they did.

**Here's my point:** the formation of the Doctrine of the Trinity at Nicea was preceded by 300 years of vigorous dialogue, debate, and disagreement within the Christian community concerning how best to understand the nature of Jesus. With Nicea and the Doctrine of the Trinity born there came the demand that the Jesus question be answered IN ONLY ONE WAY. I suggest this demand represents an expectation which is both irrational and ultimately destructive. Why? **First**, because unanimous assent to an idea or doctrine makes sense only when that idea or doctrine is so simple to understand and so free of reasonable alternatives that reasonable alternatives are nonexistent. Nothing could be further from the truth with respect to Trinitarianism. The theological and philosophical constructs used to define and describe the Trinity are highly complex, very difficult to define, and logically impossible. **Second**, instead of complexity, variation and uncertainty linking hands to create a culture of theological adventure, humility and mutual respect, the pendulum swung the other way. Following Nicea, the spirit of theological intolerance grew as Christians became increasingly hostile and violent toward other Christians who held different ideas and perspectives. And in 385, the religious spirit which demanded there could and MUST be only one answer to the question of Jesus claimed its first victim. In 385, the first Christian is executed by other Christians for "heresy."

How can anyone demand uniformity of belief in a set of ideas that even Augustine and Aquinas ultimately conclude are incomprehensible? Is it not time for Christendom, after 2000 years of fighting, splitting and rejecting one another, to adopt an intentional pluralism over a coerced adherence to orthodoxy? How one answers the question asked by Jesus - Who do you say that I am? - is deeply personal and can only be answered personally as each of us encounters the Jesus of the Gospels and the God of Love & Life. Your answer may not match my answer and that's okay. *"And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesare'a Philip'pi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that I am?' And they told him, 'John the Baptist; and others say, Eli'jah; and others one of the prophets.' And he asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Christ.'"*