

Congratulations everyone! We've made it through the first part of the ecclesiastical year which, of course, is focused upon the life and work of Christ. Today we mark the beginning of the Trinity season by paying special attention to the doctrine of God. Earlier we together recited the Athanasian creed instead of, the creed we regularly recite during Sunday worship, the Nicene. Plowing through the Athanasian creed is relatively tedious right? It uses somewhat technical and careful wording to describe God and Jesus Christ as best we can without veering off course into heresy.

The natural question that this poses is, "Why do we need to do this? I mean, why don't we just follow the Bible?" This is a very valid question because even though we have stated the orthodox faith in the words of this creed, I doubt that any of us actually really can comprehend these mysteries. Let us also disabuse ourselves of the notion that the early church just really loved to dive into esoteric theology that no one could understand for its own sake. The reason the creeds came about is because there were early teachers that would get God wrong and would start to teach their wrong position to others.

Still, we may ask, "How does this impact me? I'm not really interested in these things." The problem with this position is that one's theology will work itself out into our daily lives and practices. If we misunderstand God or Jesus, then we will invariably misunderstand our salvation which will devolve into some manner of works righteousness. The creeds were the product of the early church's debates to clarify what is orthodoxy. Their purpose is not to make God or Jesus comprehensible, but to put up guard rails to keep us on path, to keep us from following some easily comprehended system that leads us away from God's revealed Truth.

Considering this then, it behooves us to learn the creeds even though they go against our intuition. God is simply bigger than our imagination and reason. Let God reveal, and thus

define, Himself. Let us resist the temptation to fit the infinite into our finite thinking. The creeds give us appropriate language with which we can confidently speak about God.

Likewise, if we try to explain Him too much, we will likely veer into heresy so let us resist simplistic analogies or simplified terminology. God is incomprehensible to us, so it is good that we will have an eternity to dwell upon His being. As followers of the Triune God, we contemplate what He has revealed to us here and now, and in the life to come, we look forward to our glorious union with the source of all being, with the great I AM.

Turning our attention this morning, to our Old Testament reading and the Epistle lesson which reveal glimpses of the heavenly throne room, where this Great I AM holds court. What we are witnessing here in both passages is heavenly worship. There are many similarities between these accounts, but there are also some notable differences. The first similarity we may note is that both Isaiah and St. John the Apostle are called UP into heaven to witness and to participate in worship before the throne of God. Isaiah's vision pictures God on a throne, "high and lifted up." John's vision begins with a door into heaven and a voice calling to him, "Come up hither ... " John was then spiritually translated into the heavenly throne room where he witnessed the setting and activity around the throne.

These passages, along with many others in the Bible and in how we naturally imagine things to be, point us to the fact that in worship, we spiritually go up. We ascend. Thrones are elevated and we must therefore ascend to the throne to come into the presence of Him who occupies the throne. Worship is other worldly. It removes us from our ordinary settings and directs our hearts and minds to Him who is above all.

We should also note this morning is that when we gather as the people of God to worship, we are not alone. We do so, "with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, (to) laud and magnify thy glorious Name; evermore praising thee." Isaiah pictures the throne

of God surrounded by six-winged seraphim. John pictures it surrounded by four living creatures that all have differing aspects – one like an ox, one like an eagle, one like a lion, and one like a man. These traditionally have been understood to represent the four gospels. John also notes that there are 24 thrones around to central throne, and we take this symbolism to refer to the entirety of the Church – both the Old Testament saints represented by the twelve tribes of Israel and the New Testament saints represented by the twelve apostles. In other words, when we ascend into the spiritual realm to worship, we gather with the universal church, the church throughout all time. Worship removes us from time and space and surrounds us with all the beings in the universe that love God and desire His beauty. In worship we spiritually join ourselves with the Church Catholic, universal, with all believers.

I'd like to point out in our liturgy where this ascent is most dramatically indicated. Right after our confession and the pronouncement of absolution with the comfortable words on page 76 of the Book of Common Prayer, we say this call and response. "Lift up your hearts. *We lift them up unto the Lord.* Let us give thanks unto our Lord God. *It is meet and right so to do.*" (very good!) This dialog is referred to as the Sursum Corda which is Latin for "Up Hearts". The idea here is that we have confessed our sins, received God's forgiveness, and in our spiritual imaginations, we then ascend into the presence of God. In a real sense, our altar area becomes a window into the heavens. When we kneel in our worship, we should engage our liturgical imagination to understand that we are really kneeling before God Himself, and He rightly, meetly, receives the honor we give.

The next part of the service is called the sanctus, which means "holy," again in Latin. The heavenly cohort that we have joined in worship altogether says, "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, Lord God of hosts, Heaven and earth are full of thy glory: Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High. Amen." We typically also add, "Blessed is He who cometh in the Name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest," which is derived from the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem.

Of course, this is what the seraphim in Isaiah 6 and the living creatures in Revelation 4 say around the throne of God Almighty. There are two things we should notice here. The first is that our liturgy is basically the Bible arranged for worship. The historic church did not just invent things to put into the worship service, but rather studied the words which God had given us in the scriptures, set them in the context of the orthodox faith, and ordered them into a coherent narrative in obedience to Christ's commands to, "Do this in remembrance of me."

The second thing to point out here is that heavenly worship isn't a few praise choruses to warm up the crowd and then focused upon a sermon. Instead, it looks very similar to what we do here on a Sunday morning. Of course this is stated backwards. Really we should understand that our worship is patterned upon the worship of heaven. Heavenly worship is liturgical. There is a coherent conversation that focuses the attention of the entire heavenly realm upon Him who is enthroned. Isaiah 6:3 says that the seraphim speak to one another as they cry holy, holy, holy. In John 4, this liturgy is even more evident. When the four living creatures cry holy, holy, holy, then those upon the 24 thrones (in other words, the whole Church) fall on their knees, cast their crowns before the throne of God, and respond in unison saying, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

Of course, there are many more similarities that we could note, but let us also take a few minutes to note some differences. Most striking, perhaps, is the response of Isaiah compared to the response of John. Isaiah said, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Then we see something of a confession and absolution. One of the seraphim brought a coal and touched Isaiah's unclean lips and his iniquity was taken away. We confess our sins with our mouths so the mouth is the focus of the cleansing action, the

burning away of sin, the purifying of the soul. However, in Revelation, the Apostle John's sins were already forgiven because of Jesus Christ. He does not go through this ritual. Isaiah lived before Christ's Incarnation so his forgiveness in time had not been completed, but let us not doubt that the purification of his sins was still due to the salvation of Christ that was yet to be revealed.

The ministry of Christ also makes other differences in these two narratives as well. John reveals to us more details about the seraphim for, if they represent the gospels which contain the life of Christ, those details are complete for John's vision. For Isaiah, these details were hidden. In Isaiah, we do not see the 24 thrones around God as described by John. Because the forgiveness wrought for us by Christ had not yet been completed, the people of God were not yet admitted into the heavenly throne room. John sees more details because the story of mankind's redemption was completed before John experiences his vision.

One thing we do not see in Revelation 4, which no doubt probably has you wondering, is that we do not see Jesus Christ Himself mentioned. However, this is remedied if the lesson had continued into Revelation chapter 5 where Jesus is introduced as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, and a Lamb standing in the midst of the elders as if it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. We observe in Revelation 5 that the heavenly liturgy continues:

7 And (the Lamb) came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne.

8 And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.

9 And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;

10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

11 And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands;

12 Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

13 And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.

14 And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

The point we should take from this brief examination of these passages is that how we worship here at Christ the King Anglican church is not simply a matter of our personal preference. We desire to worship the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in a manner that is fitting. If the heavenly hosts worship liturgically, calling responsorially to each other, kneeling before the throne, gathering the praises of all creature in unison and in antiphon, then, just maybe ... , perhaps ... , we ought to do the same. When we approach our transcendent God, who is three in one and one in three, who defies easy definition, who exists before and beyond all time and space, who is the source of all being, ... when we approach this God in worship, let us do so with all reverence, with all care, with all skill, and with all the beauty we can muster. Let us do so with all gratefulness, with all peace, with all joy, and with all love as well, for the Lamb who was slain, now stands in our midst. Worthy indeed, is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing, for ever and ever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.