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Growing Deeper in God's image

Presentation at St. George's, Advent 1 (December 2, 2007)

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1. Opening prayer

Later this week, on December 7, we will remember the great bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose, a bishop who not only held to the faith himself but who, in doing so, led a young man named Augustine to faith in God. With the conversion of the young man, who was to become Saint Augustine, the entire course of Western history and culture was profoundly changed. It seemed appropriate to me to begin this morning's presentation with the prayer for the feast day of this faithful bishop, St. Ambrose. The Lord be with you. Let us pray:

O God, you gave your servant Ambrose grace eloquently to proclaim your righteousness in the great congregation, and fearlessly to bear reproach for the honor of your Name: Mercifully grant to all bishops and pastors such excellence in preaching and faithfulness in ministering your Word, that your people may be partakers with them of the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

2. Introduction

When David and Jennifer and I met to discuss this series of talks, it all sounded great to me. But, that changed when they asked me to do one of the talks ... and specifically when they asked me to do the talk on God ... in 20 minutes!

As you know, my task is impossible, especially to do so in a way that honours God and does not simply give a caricature of Him. But, I have accepted the task with the understanding that my real task is to help us learn from our God Himself who He is and what He desires of us. For, therein lies our salvation. And therein, too, lies the answer for what He is saying to His Church. Like many, I believe that the Anglican Church of Canada in its present form stands under the judgment of God. As such, we need today to know not only what the roots of our Church are and thus why we are headed where we are -- as Fr. David spoke about last week -- but also we need to know what God is saying to this Church today about where He intends to lead us. That is my goal for today. Next week, the Rev. Jennifer Wickham will help us work through the implications of what He is saying to us.

3. Our starting point

While we cannot know everything about God, what we can know about God with any certainty at all will come not by our feeble attempts to understand God but by revelation from God Himself. As Anglicans, we believe that knowledge of God comes to us not first of all by experience, by reason, or even by tradition, but first of all from Scripture, which contains “all things necessary to our salvation”.¹

But, where do we start in the Scriptures: at the beginning? with Jesus, the perfect revelation of God and, as such, the one who has made God known to us? with some particular way of looking at God that the Spirit has made known to us in these latter days?

One helpful place to start is that summary of God’s revelation of Himself that has been a guide to the church for almost 1800 years, the Apostles Creed.² Since the third century, it has been required that candidates for baptism respond to the question “who is God?” with the responses that are the lines that now make up the Apostles Creed.³ As such, it can serve this morning as an excellent starting point for us. You can find it on page 251 of the Book of Alternative Services -- as well as elsewhere in the book -- if you do not know it. Now, for those who may be saying, “oh, I know this”, even if you do know it, you may still hear something this morning that will help you know God better. And be warned: there will be a test at the end... for all of us!

4. God

First of all, “God”. When I say “I believe in God” I am speaking about the one who is to be worshipped by us with all that we are and have above all else. He is very simply “the one who is greater than any other than we could ever imagine or think”.⁴ The Muslim cry has it partially right but is about two essential degrees short of the truth: God is not just “great”; God is the “greatest”. There can be nothing greater.

Because of this, no human mind can fully comprehend God. And so, when the Apostles Creed begins to present us with statements of belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, a mere man or even a theologian like Augustine who will try to write a book about the Trinity will shrink from thinking that he can understand God perfectly. Yet, this is God, who makes Himself known perfectly in Scripture, as Father, and as Son, and as Holy Spirit.

5. God the Father

The Apostles Creed starts “I believe in God the Father”. There are three things that you and I are to understand about God the Father.

First, He has made Himself known as Father. That is, God has revealed Himself as one whose plans for His children are good. Who are His children? Those who can care for themselves and those who cannot -- like “the fatherless” and “widows” (Ps 68:5). In other words, all are His children, as Jesus, our Lord, taught: God so loved the world (John 3:16). As a Father, God has revealed Himself to us as one whose purposes for the world are always good, always life-giving, even if we may not always understand them.

And that is often the case, even as the second statement made about God the Father, evidences: this God is “the Father Almighty”. The word “almighty” means for most people “someone who can do anything”, as in “nothing is impossible for God” (e.g., Luke 1:37). That is true, and part of the meaning, but it is not the full Biblical meaning, and it is not even the best meaning of the word “almighty”. Think of how the term is used in the Old Testament. As one example among many, think about the words of the prophet Joel, as he cries out “Alas ... the day of

the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes" (1:15).⁵ The prophet Ezekiel compares the thunderous sound of the wings of the angelic armies with the Almighty's voice on the Day of the Lord: "I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of a host"(1:24). Today we might say, like the thunder of a thousand helicopter gunships. And the image is not inappropriate: the one text of the New Testament where God is referred to most consistently as the "Almighty" is the Book of Revelation, in which God brings all things to completion in the destruction of what is evil and in the recreation of what will always be good. Our confession of "God the Father Almighty", then, is intended to remind us that, while God's purposes are good and life-giving, there is also something terrible about God's judgment of all that would render His good purposes vain. As He did at the beginning, God will bring life out of chaos and bring the world into radical realignment with the Father's good purposes for it.⁶

How do you envision that happening? Through peace treaties and talks? No, it will not be easy to bring order out of chaos. But, then, again, it wasn't at the start either. And that is why the last thing that the Apostles Creed tells us about this God is that He is "creator of heaven and earth". We late-20th century Westerners, who have little experience with "heaven and earth" other than the controlled spaces in which we live or vacation, probably think of creation along the lines of a Disney film, in which the model is a calm forest glen, with deer and other gentle animals walking about and all getting along. But, ask the scientists among us what the creation of heaven and earth must have been like. They will tell us how terrifying it must have been. They will tell us of galactic sized nuclear explosions, of the catastrophic collisions of elements, land-masses, and planets, of tectonic plates crashing into one another and throwing up not boulders but mountains the size of the Rockies, of continents ripping away from land masses the way icebergs rip away today from Greenland, of monstrous glaciers tearing at the face of the earth and levelling everything in front of them and ripping up the earth as they moved, inexhaustibly forward, over thousands and thousands of miles, inch by inch, year after year.

My friends, my mind reels at the thought of what a witness to the creation of the heavens and earth would have seen and heard and smelled and felt. But, all that pales into insignificance as I hear the Apostles Creed tell me in 5 simple words that “God, the Father Almighty” is the one who in fact stood above all this and presided over it, who brought it all into being, fashioned it out of chaos, and through a cataclysmic, though not chaotic, process of creation, brought it into being and continues to sustain it for as long as time shall exist.

The first statement of the Creed, “God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth” invites us to know from Scripture that God’s purposes for us are good, but that the ways of achieving this are far beyond us and can in fact be terrifying, even cataclysmic, as He, than whom no greater can be thought, brings all things to perfection. This first statement should leave you, as it does me, shuddering and asking ourselves: “Who can stand before this one? Where would we even stand? Where would we appear before Him?”

The answer, of course, is that no one can stand before Him.

But, the mystery of our faith is that, He, knowing this, and as Father, has provided us a way. That way is made known to us by Himself, specifically by the second person of the Trinity, the Son, known to us in these latter days as Jesus.

6. Jesus Christ

“I believe in Jesus Christ, His only son, our Lord”.

Before talking about Jesus, let me dispell a false belief some may have. Some people believe that the Father who created heaven and earth can in fact be known by looking at those around us. After all, these people say, didn’t God also make man in his image? Isn’t that our best starting place for talking about God, with people, created in His image whom we can see?⁷

The problem with this view is that people who hold it have forgotten about the Fall. Once that world had taken the shape it mainly has today, God offered the world to the first humans, Adam and Eve, as a place to live out their created existence. But, did they delight in the Father’s good purposes for them? No. They took a fatal step toward managing their own destiny. Rather

than trusting in the Father's good purposes for them, they made a decision that set us all hurtling blindly through space and time, like the perverted citizens of Sodom at Lot's door, trying to find out where we have come from, what we are, and where we are going.⁸ The situation has become so grievous that now, thousands of years later, it is simply impossible for you or me to will to believe or do what is right, for you or me to will to stop doing bad things and start doing good things, for you or me on our own to hear God's voice and respond. The consequences of turning against God have now become built into our very genes.

But, into this chaos that man permitted to enter and distort God's good creation, turning it against the Creator Himself, God the Father, creator of heaven and earth, sent His Son, at the right time, to take birth as a man (Gal 4:4). This one God Himself named "Jesus", which means "saviour" or "deliverer", since He would not only show man the way out of the chaos but actually lead the way out. In the midst of the chaos, He walked untouched until His hour had come (cf. John 7:30) because God had set His seal upon Him, that is, God had "anointed" Him -- which is what the word "Christ" means: "anointed". There would come a time when God would let Jesus, the Anointed One, be touched. It came when Pontius Pilate, a petty and minor civil servant, ruled as imperial Roman governor in a tumultuous region of the Middle East. It was then that God set in motion a mysterious series of events that would eventually undo all that had happened since Adam and Eve. It was mysterious because it could only happen as the Father, whose purposes are always good, let His Only Son, be touched by human hands, as His Son "suffered, was crucified, died and was buried". It was the only way that Jesus, whose name means "deliverer", could deliver the Father's children, the world, from the death to which generations of sin had consigned them.

And so, on the first day of the week, today, Sunday, the day that Jews always remembered as the day that commemorated the beginning of God's creation of heaven and earth out of chaos, God the Father raised Jesus from among the dead and exchanged the ignominy of His suffering for the highest honour, giving him a name that is above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in Hell, on earth, and in heaven (Phil 2:10-11).

So, no, you will definitely not see the image of God in men and women like you and me. That image is still there but so distorted and rendered illegible by generation after generation after generation of sin that no one can see what it really must have looked like when God created us. But, we do see that image of God perfectly revealed in Jesus, the second Adam, who, was “for a little while ... made lower than the angels”, one who was made man not simply to teach us the way but to taste “death for every one”, and yet who in doing so never ceased to be the Lord, “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), the one in whom “all things were created, in heaven and on earth” (Col 1:16). Even during his earthly sojourn, those who could see, like the apostle John, saw His glory and understood that.

That same John, some years later, was privileged to have a further look at the Son. What John saw was this same one, Jesus Christ, the Father’s only Son, our Lord, in perfect union with the Father, extending His arms to welcome us to appear before God around a table. That same table is prefigured for us in space and time here as the table of the Eucharist, but one day we shall see what John saw: the full messianic banquet at which the Lord will preside, when all things shall have been brought to perfection.

7. The Holy Spirit

Even as the Father and the Son have always been and are now one in perfect union, so, too, has the Holy Spirit been one with them. The Apostles Creed does not say anything more specifically about the Holy Spirit than the phrase “I believe in the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost)”. But that is not the end of the story. For everything that concludes the Apostles Creed -- belief in a holy catholic church, the communion of saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and life everlasting -- derives from the living action of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to be the holy catholic church or a communion of saints. Oh, it is possible to have an institution that may call itself “church” that is a political structure in this world, even one that does God works and social action; but it is not possible to have a group of sinners brought together to be made holy and to work to make holy disciples of other sinners without the Holy Spirit. Without

the Holy Spirit, there can be no forgiveness of sins, even though Jesus has forgiven us, because, as anyone has tried and failed to do, it is impossible to forgive as we have been forgiven without the Holy Spirit making it possible for us to do so. And without the Spirit, no one can reach the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, because as anyone who has really sought to exert himself in an impossible task knows, you get tired, and you give up. Without the Holy Spirit, we could not walk the valley of the shadow of death, nay, run through it with all of our might. It is the Holy Spirit who gets us to the door of the banqueting hall, who opens it up for us, who washes us and dresses in the finest garments, and then brings us into the banqueting hall and sets a place before us at the banquet where the Lamb Himself presides. No church that is merely a political party in pious garb can presume to such a race and, at the end, such a rich feast. Such a sham church will be left at the door crying out for the crumbs that might be thrown to it.

8. Concluding remarks

I want to conclude by telling you what I think a person who says the Apostles Creed with this understanding looks like as he says it. I want to get physical and tell you exactly what I think that the body posture of a person will be.

I think that such a person would probably start off standing saying "I believe...". But, within a microsecond, by the time he had gotten to -- and understood! -- "Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth", he would have fallen flat on his face on the ground, overwhelmed by what those words mean. For who can stand when He appears?

And since the One confessed is always Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, there our friend would stay, never to rise again from that prostrate position, except for the fact that he would continue the Apostles Creed, saying "and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord". In saying these words, he would understand that he had been invited by God Himself to raise his head and look up and see the crucified one, standing at God's right hand as Lord, the "pioneer" of his salvation, his "great high priest" who enables him to draw near to the "throne of grace" and there "receive mercy and find grace".

And so, still lying there, he would look up. And as he looked up, he would continue the Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit". And as he uttered those words, he would hear a still, small voice teaching him how to be part of a holy church spread throughout this world and the universe, how to be a holy member of a holy communion with other holy ones, how to forgive others even as he had been been forgiven by the Father, and how to live his life so as not to become wedded to this world but how to strive with all his might for the finish line and the world to come. He would have begun to understand who God is, as revealed in Scripture, and what was necessary for him to believe about that God as summarized in its essential form in the words of the Creed.

By this time, our friend would be standing again. But, he would never forget where he was, and what he had come through, and to what he was now called in the mercy of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom be glory and honour, now and forever more. Amen.

I have said "to listen for the Word of God" rather than just to read the Bible, for the Bible is the infallible guide, provided by God to lead us to God, but it is also able to be read by us sinful men only to find things that confirm our sinful -- but firm -- opinions of what is right. Both sides in the present conflict facing the Anglican Church of Canada continue to do this, and both will face the wrath of an Almighty God whose purposes and whose revelation of Himself will not be flouted. For what matters -- what matters alone -- to us as Christians is what God wants us to do.

At various points this morning, I have spoken about God as He has made Himself known to us. I have done so with a clear purpose in mind. Our starting point has been the biblical revelation of God as summarized in the tradition of the Christian Church in the Apostles' Creed. Our starting point has *not been and can never be what we think about God. The difference between where we have begun this morning, and where people begin -- and end up -- who start with what they think about God can be summarized by the word "religion". "Religion" is human reflection on God, based on human speculation about human experience. "Revelation" is God's statement to us about who He is, what His world is like, and thus what we are in His sight.*

The main problem facing us today as Christians is not first of all from struggles over sexuality. The main problem facing us today is the problem that has faced humanity from the beginning. It is, as Paul describes it in Romans, knowing what we do know about God and turning our back on God. From this flow all the problems that now face this marred creation. True, the problems ensuing from our turning our backs on God often take the form of a dysfunctional

sexuality, as Adam and Eve found in the garden, or as Paul identifies in Romans and elsewhere. But, these are the symptoms of the disease, not the disease itself. I would no more identify the problem that a person with Parkinson's Disease faces as being the problem of having a shaking hand, than I would identify the problem that someone struggling with same-sex attraction has as being fundamentally that problem. No, the root of the problem in the case of the disease and the disordered attraction is as old as the Fall itself and will not be eliminated until all things have been brought into subjection under the one who is God Himself. The decisive battle in the war that will see the kingdoms of this earth become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ has already been fought and won: Jesus is victor over death. D-Day has happened, but the end of the war, V-Day, is not yet, and many battles remain to be fought until then.

But, we have a God, eternal in the heavens, trustworthy, almighty...

And to that God be glory and honour, from now and forever, Amen.

9. Questions

1. (Two parts) What are the aspects of God's character that you believe to be necessary in order to identify our God uniquely, and where have you gotten them from: Scripture? your church background or tradition? your reason? your experience?
2. How does the revealed character of God shape what it means to be church (in terms of doctrine, worship and liturgy, morals, etc.)?
3. How does our understanding of God inform your personal faith and challenge your personal discipleship?

Notes

¹ Articles of Religion, Article 6.

² The name comes from a 5th century tradition: "When they [the Apostles] were on the point of taking leave of each other, they first settled on a common form for their future preaching, so that they might not find themselves, widely dispersed as they would be, delivering divergent messages to the people they were persuading to believe in Christ. So they all assembled in one spot and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, drafted this short summary, as I have explained, of their future preaching, each contributing the clause he judged fitting: and they decreed that it should be handed out as standard teaching to converts" (J. N. D. Kelly, *Rufinus: A Commentary on the Apostle's Creed* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman and London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1955) 29-30).

³ P. Smulders, "Some Riddles in the Apostles' Creed," *Bijdragen* 31 (1970) 242; Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 21-72.

⁴ Paul's expression in Eph 3:20-21 was perhaps the biblical reference for Saint Anselm, the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury, in his great formulation of God, as greater than anything else that can be thought.

⁵ This is echoed in the prophet Isaiah: "Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!" (13:6);

⁶ Julia Ward Howe used this imagery when, during the American Civil War, she wrote of how God would use the Army of the Potomac to destroy the evil of slavery: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on." What would follow was the death of millions of humans.

⁷ The Anglican Church of Canada, and The Episcopal Church have recently been dominated by those who have said to justify their life-style: "God made me the way I am; I am created in His image. Who are you to tell me that God has made a mistake, or that I need to change because I do not reflect something of what God the Father wants to do in this world?"

⁸ Schaeffer, Francis A. How Should we Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture. Old Tappan, N.J.: F.H. Revell, 1976. 159-60 on Gauguin.

Works Cited

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