

“When Quirinius was governor of Syria...” “On the third day...” “The year that king Uzziah died...” Throughout Scripture we are given these occasional historical references. They anchor the narratives in time, and help us to understand that these are real people, writing about things that have context outside their religious importance. Prophets are located during the time of particular rulers - the birth of Jesus is rooted in the Roman occupation of Palestine. The story of God’s revelation is rooted in human history. But it seems to me that these ‘historical markers’ are most often given when the author has something particularly fantastic to tell us.

”In the year the King Uzziah died...I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty.” The prophet has a vision - dreams a dream - that needs an historical event to help make sense of it. The prophet has seen what no one could see - the glory of God, fully revealed. Not even the attending angels could bear to look, having one set of wings designed to cover their faces. And if that wasn’t strange enough, the prophet is charged with speaking a word from the Lord - the vision gives Isaiah a mission that cannot succeed. For as the vision continues to unfold, we discover that the job is to “make the mind of the people dull, and stop their ears and shut their eyes...” (Isaiah 6:10)

So the prophet starts with something we can confirm (the date of the king’s death) and then gives us something we can’t begin to comprehend - a vision so wonderfully terrifying, that it cannot be understood. This puzzle for the senses is the perfect introduction to the Trinity.

We acknowledge the Trinity in our creeds, in our hymns and in countless works of art. We take credible stories of God’s power and grace - heartwarming stories of God’s love - life-changing stories of God’s Son - all grounded in history and attested by centuries of experience and tradition; we take all these and make of them a doctrine, trying to explain the inexplicable. And we call it Trinity.

Now this is the catholic faith:

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity,
neither blending their persons
nor dividing their essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person,
the person of the Son is another,
and that of the Holy Spirit still another.

But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,
their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

So begins the Athanasian Creed, one of the earliest attempts to explain humanity's encounter with God. For twenty centuries since, the church has tried to refine this strange equation. And after every 'definition' through various creeds and councils, defended it - as though God needed our protection.

Isaiah's strange and glorious encounter needs no defence. Upon seeing God's glory fully revealed, the prophet has two choices; to fall down dead, or to worship and obey. Isaiah tries to describe what it is that moved him to a life in God's service; he does not try to explain it.

So too when Jesus is met in the dark by the curious (and curiously faithful) Nicodemus, he makes no attempt to defend the statements that he makes about rebirth and the movement of the Spirit. Such things remain a mystery - like the wind and the weather (in Jesus' time) - something to be encountered or endured, but not confined or controlled. Our desire for definitions leads us to believe that we can gain some measure of control over things that we can explain. Four years of Masters level study and twelve years of practical experience have taught this: I cannot 'explain' the Trinity.

Nor do I want to explain it. Sometimes complicated things need to remain complicated. Human relationships, the origins of the universe, how a fax machine sends pictures over a phone line. These are some of life's mysteries, and mysteries the should remain. The majesty of the universe, playing out across the dark, summer sky, teaches us about a different kind of beauty. The 'love-you-but-don't-like-you-right-now' moments in our families and among friends, teach us about subtlety, and the responsibility we share to bear one another's burdens for the sake of that love. And a vision of God - with the walls of the temple teetering, and smoke and fire obscuring the worst of God's best; a vision of God roaring like a winter wind; a vision of God standing quietly in the garden with blood marked hands and a look of love in his eyes...such visions don't beg for explanations.

That we might experience God in three distinct ways (as one), or in three thousand - three million - different ways, our first order of business is to say "how can this be?" - not as a challenge, but as a statement of wonder and awe.

The 'enlightenment' of the human race has come at a cost. We fill the world with beauty through our mastery of time and space. We know more now than we have ever previously known. We fly higher, go faster, dig deeper, and that may well be to our credit. But in all this we have lost sight of wonder. For the truly miraculous does not need to be explained, examined or otherwise de-mystified. The nature of God is not our plaything, to be exhausted of all wonder. God is first and last an object of our worship

and adoration. You don't need to know how God works, only that God IS. And faced with the knowledge of God's complicated and beautiful existence - challenged by the call of God to follow in the footsteps of Jesus - touched by the wild, silent excitement of God moving us to compassion and mercy, our best response is simply "Here am I; send me!"