

John 8:48-59 The Feast of the Holy Trinity

The Word of the Lord from John 8: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."
This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The Problematic Messiah Either He is the Messiah or He isn't. And if He is, it's a problem for them.

Is Jesus the Messiah? That's the hot debate between Jesus and those who question Him; and as far as civil discourse goes, our text gets off to a rocky start as they ask Him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" We'd call this an attack on credibility worthy of talk radio or cable TV: "Before we continue our even-handed discussion, isn't it fair to say that you're the demon-possessed half-breed son of an unfaithful woman? Wouldn't you agree?"

To be fair, our text drops in on the middle of the conversation, and Jesus has just told His opponents that they are doing the work of the devil. He's not trying to impugn them, but warn them: He's simply telling the truth. If He's the Messiah and they oppose Him, then they are opposing God and doing the devil a favor.

So the question of the discussion is simply this: is Jesus truly the Messiah or not? If He is, then they've got to believe everything He says about Himself. If He's not, then He really is a dangerous man to be avoided. So what does Jesus say about Himself?

He says, "I do not have a demon, but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me." For one thing, Jesus denies that He has a demon. But more than that, He declares that His Father is in heaven—not Samaria, and that He understands exactly what He's saying and the claims He's making, and that what He says honors His Father in heaven. His words aren't frivolous: He declares unequivocally that He's speaking the truth.

More than that, Jesus doesn't just say that He's seeking to honor God, but that God is seeking glory for Him! That's going to rile His audience, but next comes the statement that sets them off: "Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps My Word, he will never see death."

This is Good News, yes? The Messiah, sent by the Father, gives eternal life by His Word.

But His opponents don't hear it as deliverance, but as proof of diabolical madness. They say, "Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet You say, 'If anyone keeps My Word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"

Think about that response and the unbelief it expresses. Jesus says that, as the Messiah, He comes to give eternal life. His opponents respond that He must be possessed to say that He's greater than Abraham and the prophets, since they all died. How sad is their doubt! What hope do they have? On the one hand, it seems that they're saying, "You're mad, because the real Messiah would never claim to be greater than Abraham and the prophets!" But Abraham

was saved by trusting in the greater Messiah to come: "Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Also the prophets foretold the more-powerful Savior who would ransom His people. It sounds as if Jesus' opponents expect a messiah who is less than the patriarchs and prophets of old: but such a weak, lesser Messiah would be no help at all against sin, death and devil. Or maybe that's over-thinking it: maybe they're just saying, "We don't want You to be the Messiah, and You don't appear greater than Abraham and the prophets. Therefore, we believe You have a demon for making Yourself out to be the self-appointed Messiah.

But Jesus doesn't let them get away with that: He's not self-appointed, so He says, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing. It is My Father who glorifies Me of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known Him. I know Him. If I were to say that I do not know Him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him and I keep His Word. Your Father Abraham rejoiced that he would see My day. He saw it and was glad."

So, more good news! Jesus says He's sent by God, that the Father glorifies Him. He is the Messiah that Abraham trusted in. By faith, Abraham saw Jesus' day, believed in Him and was saved. Look at what He offers to His audience: He tells them to turn from their unbelief, and from the lies they have to have in order to maintain their unbelief, because He has life for them, too.

But His opponents aren't ready to give in. They don't want Him to be the Messiah. If He is the Messiah, they have to admit that they're wrong. They have to repent of all of their false teachings and beliefs that say you're saved by works, not by faith. So they press the obvious point: "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Abraham's been dead for centuries—doesn't this claim alone make Jesus a madman?

Jesus answers: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." That's the biggest mindblower of the text. "I am," says Jesus, and the way He says it makes His meaning very clear. In Exodus 3:14, God reveals to Moses that His name is Yahweh, which means "I AM." Jesus is saying that He's more than just a man sent by God. He's saying that He is God. He's Yahweh, in the flesh and standing before them.

So let's recap the good news that Jesus gives in our text: He reveals that He's Yahweh, now become flesh. He reveals that He's the Son of God, and that He is sent by God the Father to win salvation. And He declares that He gives eternal life by means of His Word. That's all very, very Good News.

But one cannot believe without faith. Hearing this good news, His opponents pick up stones to kill Him. He tells the truth that He's the Messiah, but He's not the sort of messiah they want. To believe in Him would be to deny themselves, to trust in His work rather than their own. And because they don't believe in Him, they want Him dead. This text illustrates an important truth about faith and Christ. Either Jesus is the Messiah or He's not. There's no middle possibility. Either you trust in Him, or you don't. Either you say, "I believe in Him," or "I deny Him." Scripture gives no option in between.

II. The Trilemma and the Truth

“Before Abraham was, I am.”

With that sentence, Jesus presents two glorious doctrines. The first is the doctrine of the Incarnation: Jesus, clearly a man, says that He is Yahweh. He is fully human, and He is fully divine. He was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem (long after Abraham died), and He was before Abraham. The second is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: if Jesus is “I Am,” then He is God. He is God along with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Those two doctrines, the Incarnation and the Trinity, are enough to make Jesus’ opponents pick up stones to kill Him in the Gospel lesson. Those two doctrines are also what the Athanasian Creed is all about, and the focus of this Festival of the Holy Trinity. This festival is, I believe, unique in the church year. The other festivals are largely about what our Lord does: Christmas is about His birth; Easter, His resurrection; Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The Festival of the Holy Trinity is not first about what our Lord does, but who our Lord is.

If, by chance, you think that makes it a snoozer of a festival, you need to reconsider. To not care who the Lord is, is actually even dumber than saying to your spouse, “I don’t care who you are, as long as you do what I say.” By faith, we rejoice that God makes Himself known to us; neglect of His identity is sin. If the Lord isn’t who He says He is, then He can’t do what He says He does.

We’ll start with the Incarnation: if Jesus is not fully man, He can’t take your place and die for your sins. If He isn’t fully God, then He can’t die for the sins of all.

Or consider the Trinity: if God is not one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then the Son cannot be one with the Father. If that’s true, then Jesus can’t be the beloved Son, fully God, who goes to the cross for you.

If He’s not the Son, then you’re not redeemed from your sin. You don’t have a Father in heaven, because you’re still unholy. If God is not one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then the Father and the Son don’t send the Holy Spirit to you to grant you faith, and so you don’t have faith. And if the Spirit does not give you faith, then the Father and the Son will not come to you and dwell with you.

If God is not one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then what does your baptism mean since you were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? If Jesus isn’t both God and man, how does it help you to be joined to His death and resurrection by water and the Word? If Jesus isn’t both God and man, how can He give you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins? See?

Who He is matters. The Lord has to be who He is in order to do what He does. Thus we gladly confess and celebrate the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity. That may still not strike you as controversial, but it sets Christianity apart. The controversy you find in the Gospel lesson is still around.

If you witness to a Muslim, the Incarnation is not just a strange teaching—it’s outright blasphemy to them. If you’re speaking to a Jehovah’s Witness, you’ll find that their version of the Bible is heavily edited to get rid of the Holy Trinity. If you’re talking religion with your

average secularist, you'll probably hear him say, "I have no problem with the idea that a man named Jesus lived once upon a time. But the idea that He was also God? That's where I've got to draw the line.

C. S. Lewis described this with his famous trilemma—a dilemma with three options instead of two. Because Jesus claimed to be God who had come to give eternal life, Lewis proposed that Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic or the Lord. Either Jesus intentionally lied in His claims to be God, in order to gain a following; or He was deluded and honestly believed He was God, but wasn't; or else He is who He said He was—the Son of God who became flesh to win salvation for mankind.

Lewis proposed that trilemma especially to challenge those who tried to run with the narrative that Jesus was just another great teacher along the lines of Ghandi or Confucius, but not the Son of God. The challenge was clear: given what Jesus said about Himself, how could you call Him a "great teacher" if He was lying or deluded? Either He was the Son of God or a dangerous man, but not just a great teacher.

Sounds a lot like our Gospel lesson, yes? Instead of "liar" or "lunatic," Jesus' opponents settle for "demon-possessed." The world doesn't want an incarnate Messiah or the Trinity, and there's really a simple reason why: both the Incarnation and the Trinity are mysteries that we accept by faith. "Who God is" is greater than we can understand, and that is not a bad thing: do you really want a God so limited that you can understand Him?

The Incarnation and the Trinity are mysteries that we accept by faith, not formulas that we can explain. Therefore, we don't argue and try to persuade people into believing these doctrines are true. Rather, we confess them. We confess what the Lord says about Himself in His Word; and we trust that the Holy Spirit will work through that Word to bring to faith all who will believe. And as we confess these truths, we rejoice in their comfort for us.

For this is true: because Jesus is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, He is the Messiah who has gone to the cross and died in your place for your sin. Because the Son died for you, you have a loving Father in heaven who sends His Spirit upon you to give you faith and the forgiveness that the Son won on the cross.

Because God is triune, all of this is delivered to you in your baptism and absolution, because you are baptized and absolved in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Because the incarnate Son is a person of the triune God, He delivers to you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. That is who Jesus is: the incarnate, second person of the Trinity.

The world will try to persuade you that He is a long-gone liar, lunatic or even demon-possessed Samaritan. But you have His Word. By His Word, and by God-given faith in His Word, you know who He is and what He has done. And because He is the Son of God who became flesh to go to the cross for you, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In whose name?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen