

Every year on Trinity Sunday, we say the Athanasian Creed. And I suspect that it's a creed which causes more questions than it gives answers. Because it's the kind of creed that makes us go: "Well, what does this mean? What does it mean when it says this? Or what does this line mean?" and so forth. And one of those things that I think causes confusion for us is its insistence that we have to believe all of these things, or otherwise we're not going to be saved. As we said at the end of the creed: "This is the catholic faith. Whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved." I think that trips people up a little bit, because we ask: "What does that mean, exactly?" We ask: "Does that mean that we have to agree on absolutely everything? Why can't we all just get along, especially when insisting on these things causes problems in the world?" Or we say: "What if I don't understand what the creed said? What if it doesn't make sense to me? If I don't understand something like the Trinity, does that mean that I'm not going to be saved?" Because a doctrine like the Trinity is something that's totally beyond our ability to fully comprehend. So is that something then that we have to grasp if we want to be saved?

But these questions, Christians, boil down to one deeper question, the one that we want to wrestle with today. And that question is this: what is the purpose of right doctrine? Why do we insist on the truth, especially when it causes problems in the world? Why do we have to speak so carefully? That's the question that we need to wrestle with today as we consider our readings.

So what is the point of correct doctrine, then? Is it to hold it over somebody else so that I can say: "I'm right. You're wrong. Deal with it"? Do we insist on these things because we're trying to win arguments? Because we're trying to be better than someone else? Unfortunately, it can certainly fall into that, Christians. We can fall into a kind of loveless orthodoxy, insisting on the truth at the expense of all else. Paul talks about this in 1 Timothy chapter 6, where he says that a false teacher is someone who "has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions." So we can fall into this way of thinking and cause all kinds of controversies, to cause all kinds of quarrels, to take what is been given to us for our good and to turn it into a weapon, something that I can attack someone else with. We are attempting to win rather than to build up. But that is something that we must not do.

Now, Paul is not saying here that we should all just get along or something like that. Paul still insists on the truth. We have an obligation to point out false teaching. No one did it more than Paul. And we have an obligation to insist on what is true over and against what is false. We cannot simply agree to disagree, because this is God's truth. But what then is our goal? Do we insist on these things only so that we can win an argument with someone else? If that's the case, we have missed the point.

Do we insist on right doctrine as a way of saying that we have to think in the right way or to say the right things, even if that means that it doesn't actually have anything to do with the way that I live? To insist on this and this and this in the head intellectually, but then it never comes anywhere near the heart? Unfortunately, this can happen too, Christians. We can end up reciting the Creed simply for the sake of reciting the Creed, just because it's what we're supposed to say. But God talks about this also in Isaiah chapter 29, when he says: "This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men." This is the kind of faith, so to speak, which the Jews had.

One which claims to believe in God, one which claims to listen to everything that he says, but then turns around and lives in an entirely different way. The head never meets up with the heart.

Now, what we believe, Christians, is important. What we think is important. It is not a matter of believe whatever you want. Just because someone claims to be a Christian doesn't mean that they are. But we have to ask ourselves: are we saying these things only because we have to, only because it's a matter of the head and not a matter of the heart? If so, we have missed the point.

So what then is the point, Christians, of insisting on right doctrine? Why do we insist on the truth, even when it causes problems? Why do we need to be so careful? Paul shows us in our epistle reading for today. Because at this point in the book of Romans, at the end of chapter 11, Paul has just finished laying out in great detail what the Gospel is. Beginning all the way in chapter 1 and ending at this point in chapter 11, he's talked about what the Gospel is, what it means for us, what it means to be saved, what it means to be justified, and so forth. And throughout all of those things, Christians, he has spoken very, very carefully, saying that this is what is true and this is what is false. He is being very specific in his words. And chapters 9 through 11, in particular, deal with a very difficult question. He's trying to answer the question: if the Gospel is what it is, why have the Jews rejected it? Why have those we would expect to believe the Gospel without any hesitation been the ones who have fought so hard against it? That's a very difficult question, one that requires a very careful answer. And so Paul in these three chapters lays out that answer, speaking very carefully, speaking very specifically, so that we can see the answer to it. And the answer to that question, very briefly, Christians, is this: that just because someone is descended physically from Abraham, just because someone is his physical flesh and blood descendent does not mean that they're automatically saved. If they don't have faith, they will be rejected. And faith, Paul says, is something which comes only from God. It's not something that comes from within us, but it is a gift which is given to us by the Lord. And God had partially hardened those of Israel so that the Gospel would go out to all the world. So that all the nations, including us, would come to believe in Jesus. But those who are physically descended from Abraham, those who are physically Jews, when they believe in Jesus, Paul says, they will be unhardened and made part of Israel once more.

Now, there's a lot more in these chapters that we could go through, because Paul is very, very careful about what he's trying to say. But you can see him at work here, saying that this is true and that this is false. That he needs to speak clearly and specifically so that there is absolutely no confusion whatsoever. Because there's so many ways that we can go astray here, so many ways that we can become confused.

So what is his point then? Why does he do all of this? Is his point so that he can win some kind of argument? Do that he can say: "I'm right. You're wrong. Deal with it"? Not at all. Paul is deeply concerned with those that he is speaking to and those he is talking about. Because in the beginning of chapter 9, Paul even says that he would be willing to be cut off from God entirely, to lose his salvation if it meant that his kinsmen would come to believe in Jesus. That's a man who deeply cares about those he's speaking to. Is Paul's point in this to say: "This is the way that you have to think, and it doesn't really matter if it never comes down to your heart? Just make sure you have it up in your head?" Not at all. Because in the chapter right after this one, in

chapter 12 and going forward, Paul shows very clearly what it means to live as a Christian. He shows us how all of the things he's been talking about lead to a Christian life.

So what is his point then? Why does he say all of these things? He does it, Christians, to glorify God. This is why he says in our reading for today: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" He's not saying, "I don't understand any of it, so I'm just going to give up." What he's saying is that everything that he has just talked about up to this point has led him to this. Talking about the Gospel leads him to give praise to God. Talking about what it means to be justified leads him to give praise to God. Talking about why Israel is being hardened and how they will ultimately be saved leads him to give praise to God. In all of these things, Christians, he glorifies the Lord who has revealed them to him. Paul says how great God is! How deep are his riches toward us in his Son, Jesus Christ! How deep is his wisdom in saving us! How deep is his knowledge in doing all of these things on our behalf! God is far greater than we can even think or imagine, because he is the Lord of all. Paul has become lost in wonder, lost in praise, because of everything that God has done for him. And also because of who God is. Paul praises him because he is the almighty Lord. He is the everlasting Father, the King of all creation. The Lord is the one from whom all things come and the one to whom all things belong. To this God, Paul says, belong all glory and honor forever. Amen!

So this, then, is the point, Christians, of right doctrine. This is the point of insisting on the truth, even when it causes divisions in the world. This is the point of why we speak so carefully. We do all of these things because it is the truth, and the truth glorifies the Lord. It is his truth, his Word. And when we say what he says, we give thanks and praise to him. So that's why we say the Athanasian Creed. That's why we insist on the things that we believe, why we speak so carefully. Because if we didn't speak so carefully, we would not have God. We'd have something else. We'd have some other truth other than that which comes from the Lord. But Christians, we have the truth in the Lord. And when we speak carefully about this truth, we give glory and thanks to him. Our doctrine, the things that we teach, leads us to give praise to God forever.

Therefore, Christians, to the most holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to the Uncreated, the Infinite, the Eternal, and the Almighty God and Lord, to this God who is alone God above all things, be all glory, honor and worship, now and forevermore. Amen!