

Holy Trinity  
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✠ Jesu juva ✠

## TO KNOW

Isaiah 6:1-7; Romans 11:33-36; John 3:1-15

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

**I**n the quest for knowledge there are two goals that surpass all others: to know God and to know one's self. Since ancient times man has sought out these two goals. The first, to actually know God, most thought unattainable. The best one could shoot for is to know about the divine. But to know one's self, that seemed a little more realistic of a goal. The ancient Greeks, who were lovers of knowledge and wisdom (hence the word philosophy which in Greek means love of wisdom) thought this goal of self-knowledge so important that they even carved the phrase "Know thyself" on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi.

And to this very day people believe, and perhaps rightly so, that the attainment of true self knowledge is a doorway to greater wisdom. Some even see knowledge of self as the pathway to knowledge of God. Search deep within yourself, they tell you, and you will begin to see the Divine. There is no doubt that there is evidence of the Divine in your very being. Humanity was created in the image and likeness of God, after all; and though that image is shattered by sin, it's very brokenness, I think, bears witness to its having been there once long ago. In some ways, in other words, we still have a likeness to God. We are not in our nature good and righteous, or holy as He is; for that was lost in the Fall, but we are still far different, and far superior in many ways, to any other creatures.

In today's Introit, the Psalmist even proclaims: "What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor." And again in Psalm 139: "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well." And yet, St. Paul bemoans the condition of mankind, having lost the image of God's righteousness, saying: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Romans 7).

That being the case, that according to nature, there is no Godliness or righteousness in us, nothing good, how can one come to actually know God through knowledge of one's self? From the ancients to the post-moderns, those seeking wisdom along this path, have chosen the wrong way. One could never come to a knowledge of the mysteries of God's nature and persons as we confessed Him

to be this morning. Such knowledge as expressed in the Athanasian Creed, or even in the Nicene or Apostles Creeds, is beyond human experience, wisdom, or intuition. We only truly know God when God reveals Himself to us. And we have this revelation by means of the Holy Scripture, which is God's Word concerning Himself – and concerning us. We confess the mystery of the Holy Trinity, one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God, only because this is the way God has revealed Himself to be. We could never, ever, come to such knowledge on our own, or collectively. St. Paul expresses this truth: "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"

But that we may actually know Him, God has revealed Himself to us. And because God has revealed Himself through the Scriptures, we can say with certainty that contrary teachings about God, are not actually dealing with the real God at all, but with a false god. Hence we confess with some boldness: "Whoever will be saved shall, above all else, hold the catholic faith. Which faith, except everyone keeps whole and undefiled, without doubt he will perish eternally. And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance."

As soon as one departs from faith in the Holy Trinity, such a person no longer has the true God or salvation from Him. Those claiming that Allah is the same as the God of the Old Testament have believed a lie, for they deny God as He has revealed Himself in those holy and prophetic writings. Those who claim that Jesus is not Divine in the same way as the Father is Divine, have denied the true God. Those who claim that the Holy Spirit is but an emanation of God, or that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are just different names or modes of expressions of one Divine Person no longer have the true God. God has told us who and how He is, and we are not free to depart from that Divine self-disclosure. To do so is an act of rebellion and unbelief. So don't be fooled by the religious propaganda which seeks always to say that we all worship the same god. We don't. We worship the Holy Trinity through Christ Jesus the second person of the Trinity.

And apart from the Trinity, and apart from Jesus, there is no God. In Christ Jesus, we come to know God as He is toward us. In Him we come to know the character of God and the works of God. St. Paul says: "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:8-9). And what do learn of God from our knowledge of Jesus and His Gospel? We learn that despite our sins, God still loves us. We learn that He loves us so greatly that to save a fallen and damnable people, He comes down and becomes one us and suffers and dies for us that He may also rise again and raise us again to new life.

But knowing God is much more than simply gathering together information about Him. That is knowing about God. And while important, vital even, knowing about God is not quite the same as knowing God. In Christ Jesus we not only learn more about God, but we come to know God.

Isaiah learned this when he had the vision of heaven as we heard in today's Old Testament reading. In this vision he didn't just learn about God; he met Him and came to know Him. There he stood witnessing the glory of God, terrified, certain that he was about to die. "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 my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts." And he was right to be afraid, for what person can stand before God; what sinner can survive an encounter with Him who is so completely Holy that He demands complete holiness?

But Isaiah is not destroyed. The angel brings a living coal from the place of sacrifice and touches Isaiah's lips and declares that his sins have been taken away and purged. What is this, but the grace of Christ, who for the love of humanity became the once-and-for-all sacrifice to remove and purge away our sins? He is the living coal, the one who was sacrificed and yet lives.

And by Him we also meet and come to know God. How, you may ask? We come to know Him by means of Holy Baptism. In this Sacrament all of this doctrinal talk which can seem cold and detached from real life, becomes real for us and draws us into a union with the Holy Trinity through the work and gift of Christ Jesus. In this Sacrament we encounter the One whom the seraphim proclaim to be Holy, Holy, Holy. And He puts His name upon us, claims us as His own while giving Himself to us, with the words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And by means of these Words now attached to water, we are washed clean of our sins, washed in the blood of Christ, born anew, as Jesus Himself explains, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And it is only when we are reborn that we come to actually know God. Therefore Jesus says: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." But having been born again, we are born into the kingdom, into life with God, and knowledge of God by means of His self-revealing and self-giving to us.

And by this rebirth something else happens in us too. The image of God is restored in us. For in Baptism, as St. Paul tells us, we have each put on Christ.

Man is by nature a fallen race, the image of God broken and lost, as I said before; but Christ came as a new Man; a Man who had never been infected with sin, whose nature had not been corrupted by it. In Him the image of God was not lost or broken, Him being, as Hebrews says, "the brightness of [God's] glory and the express image of His person." And so in Christ we see mankind as God always intended humanity to be, a perfect reflection of how God Himself is. Humanity was to bear this reflection, a reflection not of His Divine essence, but

of His Divine love and holiness. But Adam and all every one of his descendants, every one of us, has and continues to fail to reflect Divine love and holiness. We see only this Divine love in the Man Jesus; in a Man who also happens to bear the Divine essence as the Second Person of the Trinity, but who is also truly and fully human; more fully human than we are even, for He had no sin. And so when in Holy Baptism you put on Christ, the image of God is also restored to you through Christ. You are a new man or a new woman, a man or woman who lives by God's love and grace, and who also reflects that image.

And so in baptism, we not only come to know God, but finally at last come to know ourselves. We come to know what it means to be in Christ, what it means to bear the image of God, what it means to be fully human. For we have been reborn.

And now we live knowing who we are and knowing God. And this knowledge and life is entirely by His grace. Because we still carry with us the old nature with its brokenness and sin, we will struggle with who we are and with God Himself. And faith is a struggle. And the life of faith, the life of striving to be whom God has called you to be and made you to be, is a struggle. Because of the sin and unbelief still at work against us we will at times doubt His love and our status. And we will fail to be fully human, failing to reflect His love and goodness perfectly in this life. But do not despair. Christ came down to save you. He was lifted up on the cross you may believe, and "not perish but have everlasting life."

And God has revealed Himself to you, sealing you with His thrice Holy name, and giving you rebirth into His kingdom. And He does not fail. His grace is not ineffective, but powerful. And He does not withdraw it from those who, while struggling, seek His aid. But rather He sends His Gospel and declares: "Behold, you have been touched by My Son, you have been clothed with Him, washed in His blood, and united to Him, your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged. Know yourself; as I now see you. Through My Son you are holy. You are righteous. His sacrifice and Word have made it so. And we are promised in I Corinthians 15:49: "As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man."

And for this grace and knowledge, let us give all thanks and praise, glory and honor, to the God we know, who has revealed Himself to us that we may be saved: the Holy Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠