

Faith in the Miracle of God's Growth

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“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed in the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day; and – voila! – the seed would sprout and grow.” It’s a miracle! “With what can we compare the kingdom of God? What parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, with the largest of branches, so large and long that birds can make their nests in its shade!” It’s a miracle, God’s work. (Mark 4:26-28, 30-32) I ran across another short story that made a very similar point. It’s a story by a Christian preacher named Dr. James Allan Frances:

*There was a man who was born in an obscure village,
the child of a poor young woman.
He grew up in another obscure village.
He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty.
Then, for three years he was an itinerant preacher.
He never owned a home.
He never wrote a book.
He never held an office.
He never went to college.
He never had a family.
He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place He was born.
He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness.
He had no credentials but Himself.
While he was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him.
His friends ran away. One denied him. Another betrayed him.
He was turned over to His enemies.
He went through a mockery of a trial.
He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves.
While he was dying, His executioners gambled
for the only piece of property He owned on earth – His coat.
When He was dead, He was laid to rest in a borrowed grave,
made available through the kindness of a friend.
Two thousand years have come and gone,
and today He is the centerpiece of the human race.
I am surely right on the mark to observe that all the armies that ever marched,
all the navies that ever sailed,
all the parliaments that ever sat,
all the kings that ever reigned, taken together,
have not affected life on earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.*

That *one solitary life* is like the tiny seed that grew from almost nothing to become more than just a large shrub, but a family tree, two billion strong, covering the globe, with followers in virtually every nation on earth, changing the course of human history in more ways than any could have imagined, or predicted. Mark's Gospel does not have a Sermon on the Mount as is found in Matthew, or the classic parables that are found in Luke, or the long discourses that occur in John. These stories about seeds and sowers in chapter four are the best Jesus has to offer in the Gospel of Mark. But just in case you are still wondering what Jesus might have meant in talking about the miracle of growth from the smallest of seeds and insignificant beginnings to results that dramatically changed the landscape of life, Jesus' own story would be the perfect illustration of what can happen when God sets His mind to changing the world through the seed planted with the truth of God's love and revealed through that *one solitary life*.

Last Sunday I began talking about what the doctrine of the Trinity meant by ruling out some historic mistakes that helped to identify what it didn't mean. Toward the end of my sermon I finally got around to saying that the doctrine of the Trinity was basically about lifting up Jesus as the full and unreserved revelation of God. It all began with the Resurrection and culminated with the text of the confession of faith we know as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, called the Nicene Creed for short, which proclaimed clearly and definitively that Jesus the Christ is God – God from God, light from light, true God from true God, one with the very being of God. The key question that arises with this confession of faith has always been “Is Jesus *God?*” or “Is God *Jesus?*”

The first wave of attempts to understand who Jesus was and what he revealed about God involved clothing Jesus with all sorts of biblical titles that helped to get at what he did. *Son of man* was a title that Jesus himself used, not to talk about his humanity, but to identify himself with the biblical figure mentioned in the Book of Daniel, and elsewhere (Ezekiel and Enoch), whose arrival on earth signaled that the “end of days” was near. Titles like *Rabbi* and *Master* morphed easily into my *Lord*, which conveyed a far greater glory when the Resurrection proclaimed the Crucified Jesus to be the Risen *Christ*, *God's Son*, our *Savior*. *Son of David* and *Son of God* were two titles that offered interesting insights into who Jesus was and who he would become. *Son of David* appealed to the biblical record of King David's unique role in Israel's history, joining a victorious past to a glorious future through the promise of the *Messiah*, known in the Greek-speaking world as *the Christ*. *Son* was the unique and loving relationship that God had with Israel's king. There is a classic coronation song found in Psalm 2, which in verse 7 proclaims, “*Thou art my Son. This day I have begotten you.*” As a matter of historical record, many cultures in the ancient world celebrated God's special blessing bestowed upon their king. In Israel's case, God's love for King David dignified the beloved title of *Son* to David and his royal line. *Son of David*, when applied to Jesus, identified his past and his future. He came from the house and lineage of David; and he would one day usher in the reign of God's kingdom, ruling as *Lord* and *Christ*, the *Messiah*, who would also come to be known as *King of kings*, *Lord of lords*, *Prince of Peace*, *Everlasting Father*.

The title *Son of God* draws on these references to biblical history, but also wound up opening the door of Christian faith to the language of Greek philosophy and models of Roman rule. In the biblical models mentioned above, *Son* was a term of endearment, establishing the king as God's beloved son. In Greek thought, this reference opened our confession of Jesus as Lord to a concept that linked the divine and human through terms like *coeternal*, *coequal*, *'omo ousia*, of one being with God the Father Almighty. As this language came to play a more determinative role in understanding who Jesus was, interesting and challenging questions arose. Does what we know about Jesus tell us who God is, or does what we know about God tell us who Jesus is? Is Jesus *God*, or is God *Jesus*? In order to make sense of the confession Jesus is God and God is Jesus, we have got to know what we mean by *Jesus* and what we mean by *God*. So, does what we know about God tell us who Jesus is, or does what we know about Jesus tell us who God is? I know that it sounds almost as if we are saying the same thing, but the results are vastly different, and we often take the wrong course, drawing radically different conclusions.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was originally designed to lift up Jesus as the source and substance of our knowledge of God. But as time passed and history changed, the Christ of faith overwhelmed the Jesus of history. The victorious Lord of all took the place of the suffering servant of God. The divine-human sitting in glory at God's right hand replaced the humble humanity of that one solitary life in revealing the truth about the God we worship. The world wants a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, ubiquitous, perfect in majesty, power and might. Jesus lived the life of humble service, with no claims to earthly wealth or worldly dominion. He suffered the humiliation of false accusation, the injustice of justice denied, the shameful death of crucifixion, all at the hands of unworthy rulers who were not up to the challenge of offering real leadership. Nevertheless, that's the life and narrative God used to reveal the majesty of true glory, the key to true life, the truth of God's love alive among us. That's the life and narrative God affirmed with the event of the Resurrection. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the One who embodies the truth about God. Real knowledge of the one, true, and living God begins with what we know about Jesus. Never take your eyes off the bouncing ball of Jesus' life when it comes to knowing the true nature of divinity.

That's what the doctrine of the Trinity was trying to say. That's what Dr. James Allan Frances was saying with his short story called *One Solitary Life*. That's the challenge each generation of Christians must face. Are we willing to embrace, worship, and follow the God who reveals His glory through the weakness of humble service, or is it the power and majesty of the victorious Lord of all that we seek and expect in the God we worship? This is the enduring question for the ages. Many of us gradually come to allow what the world requires of God to shape our vision of who Jesus is as one with God the Father, never to taste the humiliation of shame and defeat again. But stories like *One Solitary Life* remind us that God chose a different narrative to reveal His true glory, not the earthly glory of Roman rule, but the suffering love of a humble servant. That's the key to the God we know, the God we worship, the God we serve ... in Jesus' Name. Amen