

Human beings have been making idols for a very long time. The oldest one found yet was discovered in a cave known as Hohlefels in Germany. A figurine of a woman believed to be a fertility goddess. And while the age of the idol is disputed, the fact that it's made of wooly mammoth tusk should be enough to tell you that it's really, really old.

But why? Why make these idols? Why are we more attracted to a dead lump of carved ivory or stone or wood or metal than we are to the living God of heaven?

Well, that right there is part of the answer. God is in heaven and we are not. And it's part of our human nature to bring God down to earth. To make him look like us. Paul talks about that in Romans 1. *“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”*

We like to have a god who's accessible to us. Who looks like things we recognize and acts like us and shares our limitations. And so we end up with gods like the Greeks and Romans and Egyptians. Gods who are weak and petty and cruel and sinful. Gods who can be manipulated and controlled and defeated.

It's all foolishness, as Paul points out. But sin always is. As the book of Proverbs tells us time and time again, righteousness and wisdom go hand in hand. To be truly wise is to accept that God the Father is transcendent. Which is just a fancy way of saying that God is different from us. That he is immortal and invisible. All powerful and all knowing. Omnipresent and never changing. God is beyond us in every way.

And as sinful human beings who arrogantly think we can understand everything and be like God, knowing good and evil, we don't particularly like that idea that God is beyond our understanding. It makes us feel small. It makes us want to create false gods that we can understand.

I bring all this up because this transcendent understanding of God is really at the center of the argument that Jesus has with the Jewish leaders in our Gospel lesson. Because while the Greeks and Romans and Egyptians and us today may not particularly like the idea of God being completely different from us, the Jewish leaders kinda did.

They embraced the transcendence of God. They had figured out that you could put God so far out of reach that he really didn't even matter anymore. Yes, God is immortal and invisible and perfect and almighty. He is all of those things... way out there. Way up in heaven.

So far away that we can't possibly understand him. So far away that we can't possibly expect him to do anything for us. And so far away that we can be the gods of our people.

That's what they had done. They had put God on such a high pedestal that he was out of sight. And they could then act in his place. All the people could come to them, to the Jewish leaders, for advice and justice and comfort.

They put themselves between God and his people. And they said, “You'll never understand God. He's too far away. Come to us instead. We'll answer all your questions. We will be your gods.”

And then Jesus shows up. And people start coming to him for advice and justice and comfort. But he doesn't speak about God being far away. He speaks about God being right here, in their midst. He speaks about he himself being God come to earth.

And the Jewish leaders don't like it. They don't like it one bit. And they do everything they can to undermine Jesus.

In our lesson today, they say that he is a demon possessed Samaritan. That is a double insult, if you're not aware. It's like me calling someone a communist Muslim terrorist. It doesn't even make sense, but it sounds really bad.

In response, Jesus tells them, “Look, I'm not saying anything that glorifies myself. Everything I say glorifies God the Father. You know... that same Father that we're both supposedly worshiping. How about we let him judge which one of us is right? Because I can promise you this, if you believe what I'm telling you, you will never taste death.”

This gets them all in a tizzy. Because he is claiming to have the power over life and death. A power that not even Abraham had. Jesus is claiming to be the transcendent God.

Which didn't make any sense to the Jewish leaders that day. They were ready to stone him for saying it. And yet, it's exactly what Isaiah had promised. God was coming to earth. The Mighty God would come to us and sit on the throne of David to establish justice. To take away his people's guilt and end the war between heaven and earth.

And yet, this Mighty God would come as a child. He would come as a son born to an ordinary, sinful woman. And so we have another term to apply to God. Yes, God is transcendent. He is far above and beyond us. But God is also imminent in Jesus Christ. Fully God and fully man. Begotten of the Father from eternity and also born of the virgin Mary. Transcendent and imminent. Far away and impossible to understand, but also born in human flesh and totally understandable, at the very same time.

It doesn't make sense. Divine things like the incarnation never do. But it's what scripture confesses and so it's what we confess. Which is something that the Jewish leaders refused to do. In fact, they were ready to kill Jesus over the very concept of it.

But not that day. They'll get their chance to kill him. And they'll fail. Because he really does have power over life and death. Because he really was telling the truth all along. And the resurrection was proof of it. Whether they liked it or not.

The Jewish leaders didn't want a God like Jesus, who was right there standing in front of them. The Greeks and Romans and Egyptians didn't want a God like the Jews, who was out there, completely separate from them. But the reality is that God is neither, because he is both.

Which is why it's so important to confess rightly things like the Trinity and the Incarnation. It matters. It matters because God is transcendent. He is different from us. Perfect in every way. Almighty in power. The creator of the world. The ruler of heaven. Incomprehensible in every way.

And yet, God is also imminent. Close to us. The same as us. God was born. He had a human mother and an adoptive human father. He grew up. He ate. He slept. He learned. He felt joy and anger and sadness and frustration. He suffered. And he died. He was human in every way.

The Trinity matters because God is both. And if you think of God only as the Father, then you'll have a God who is so far from you he doesn't even matter. And if you think of God only as the Son, then you'll have a God who's little more than an ordinary human doing some pretty amazing magic tricks.

But to have a God who is both? Now you have a God of both great power and great love. A God who judges and a God who saves. A God free from the curse of sin, death, and the devil, and yet a God who knows our every weakness, suffering, and temptation. A God who has always been and always will be, and a God who was born, lived, died, and rose again for his people.

In Christianity we don't worship idols. Originally, that was because God specifically told his people not to worship idols. But it turns out there was a reason for that commandment: we don't need idols. Idols exist to make a transcendent god feel imminent and close to you. We already have a God who is imminent and close to us. To us a mighty God was born. To us the Son of God is given. We don't need idols for we already have the one true God: Immanuel, God with us. Amen.