

The mystery of those we love

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One of my favorite things to teach in a seminary setting is Christology, particularly the early church's development of what would become "orthodox" understandings of both the person and work of Jesus.

In the patristic period leading up to the great ecumenical councils, the Christian imagination had to wrestle with both scripture and the experience of Christian communities to understand how to speak about who Jesus was and how his life, death and resurrection embodied God's redemptive activity in the world. For all of the squabbles and politics involved, this was foundational work, and it has bequeathed to each subsequent generation creeds that, if not always believed fully, at least provide the backdrop against which provocative questions might still be asked.

As important as such creeds remain, however, it is striking to read the Gospel narratives and remind ourselves that the apostles did not know the Apostles' Creed.

They were not sure who Jesus was, or what he planned to do. They did not know that he was heading for a tomb, or that that tomb would one day be empty. The Trinity was not a concept to which they had access (even as they were on the front lines of the outworking of the Spirit's power!). Jesus was a friend and guide, but he was also a mystery. Always surprising, always just out of reach. Never one that could be understood—hence the ongoing need for trust.

Isn't that often how it is for us? That the friends and loved ones we hold closest are also the ones who are most mysterious? When we love someone, when we begin to

fathom the depths of who they are, then they become even more of a beautiful mystery to us.

This is how I've come to regard even the "hard" sayings of Jesus, such as Luke's account of his warning of "swords" and division. If Jesus only ever gave sayings that fit nicely into my sense of how a benevolent religious teacher ought to teach—if he were fully comprehensible—then he would become a pleasant object for contemplation, or perhaps a wise historical sage. Anything but a mystery.

I have come to believe that one of the most effective ways for preachers to convey the gospel intensity of both the person and work of Jesus is to invite people—not into knowledge but into ongoing mystery. Mystery is often the ground of love.