



### **Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-367)** **Seeing God in Christ**

In 350 Constantius became sole emperor of the Roman Empire – and he was a decided Arian. He placed increased pressure on the bishops of the West, and so the councils of Arles in 353 and Milan in 355 adhered to the Council of Tyre's condemnation of Athanasius passed back in 335. These were dark days for the cause of Trinitarian orthodoxy, but one of the Western bishops who stood firm in its defence was Hilary of Poitiers in Gaul (France).

Hilary's biography would be difficult to write, as relatively little is known about him. He was probably born between 310 and 320, and became bishop of Poitiers around 350. He was married and had a daughter, Abra. Possessing a gift for poetic expression, he became one of the most prominent hymn-writers in the early Church. It is often assumed that he was converted to Christ by reading the Bible. As a bishop, Hilary broke off communion with bishops who had condemned Athanasius. The result was that at the council of Béziers in 356 Hilary himself was deposed and exiled to Phrygia. Here he learned Greek and studied the works of the Greek fathers.

After some years, Constantius authorised Hilary to return home without subscribing to a profession of faith that was favourable to the Arian creed. Yet this was not regarded as a reinstatement – more like the removal of a troublemaker. Back in the West, Hilary was received in triumph, and was the moving spirit at a council at Paris in 361. There he was a spokesman for moderation in doctrine and discipline. Like Athanasius, he only condemned decided Arian leaders, not those bishops who had wilted under coercion. At Milan in 364, he tried unsuccessfully to remove the Arian bishop, Auxentius, who had been there since 355. Hilary had to return home, and Jerome records that he died in 367.

Hilary's chief doctrinal work, *On the Trinity*, appears in twelve books. In most ancient manuscripts it lacks a title. At the very outset, Hilary declares his position as equidistant from Arianism (the belief that Christ is the highest of the angels)

and Sabellianism (the belief that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the one person acting in different roles). Furthermore, he interpreted *homoiousios* ('like essence') to be equivalent to *homoousios* ('same essence'). He considered that the baptismal formula in Matthew implied everything concerning God and his salvation. Indeed, 'What is not contained in these words concerning the mystery of human salvation?'

Although he became known later as 'The Athanasius of the West', Hilary does not owe a lot to Athanasius. His Trinitarianism is anchored firmly in Scripture, and he was wary of analogies such as the root and the plant, the source and the stream, or fire and heat. He rightly emphasised that we can only know God as he has revealed himself in Scripture.

As Hilary contemplated Christ as 'the visible image of God', he sought to describe the grace and mystery of the incarnation: 'The one only-begotten God, ineffably born of God, entered the Virgin's womb and grew and took the frame of poor humanity. He who upholds the universe, within whom and through whom are all things, was brought forth by common childbirth; He at whose voice archangels and angels tremble, and heaven and earth and all the elements of this world are melted, was heard in childish wailing. The invisible and incomprehensible, whom sight and feeling and touch cannot gauge, was wrapped in a cradle. If any man deem all this unworthy of God, the greater must he own his debt . . . He by whom man was made had nothing to gain by becoming man; it was our gain that God was incarnate and dwelt among us, making all flesh His home by taking upon Him the flesh of one. We were raised because He was lowered; shame to Him was glory to us. He, being God, made flesh His residence, and we in return are lifted anew from the flesh to God.'

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