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Gabrielle Thomas (G): What they tend to do is give you their idea of how he works and who he is by the way that they name him. And I still have a lot of work to do on this, but even now I have a list of 50 names. Wow! And you absolutely can't point to the red figure with horns and a trident that we would see coming out at Halloween, for example.

Hannah Black (H): Hi, I'm Hannah Black and I'm your host on The Leader's Way, an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School at Yale.

The Reverend Dr. Gabrielle Thomas is assistant professor in early Christianity and Anglican studies at Candler School of Theology. Before that, she was a lecturer at our very own Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. Gabby serves on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Theological Reflection Group and the Anglican Oriental Orthodox International Commission. She's an ordained priest in the Church of England and she currently serves as theologian in community at St Luke's Episcopal Church, Atlanta. Gabby has published three books and is currently writing a fourth on problems with the devil in Cappadocian thought.

Gabby's scholarship and my scholarship both focus on the Cappadocians, who were fourth century bishop theologians in modern-day Turkey.

Okay, let's dive in. Tell us who are the Cappadocians, what's their relationship to each other?

G: Depending on how far you want to go, there's three, four, or many. The ones that I'm working on, plus their sister, say Basil of Caesarea is the eldest and his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa wrote a lot of based theology and letters to one another, which contain an awful lot of interesting doctrinal thought and Macrina is their sister and then Gregory of Nazianzus is their frenemy, I think is the best.

Because there's a lot of very subtle ways that appears to be not happy with either of his friends on many, many occasions, but clearly there's a relationship between the three of them and they're certainly working out their theology through sort of sharpening each other is very clear. But there's no doubt that that Basil goes first and leads the way in many of the later texts that we have from the other two. They sort of each got their own unique way of thinking about God and they each emphasize slightly different aspects of what it means to do theology. And they were living in the fourth century and really as post-Nicaea but before Chalcedon, they're still doing all the hard work of how do we delineate a doctrine of the Trinity and how do we speak about Jesus Christ as the Son of God. And so they're still very much grappling with all of these ideas and beliefs in conversation with the Bible and obviously the Greek philosophical culture of their day.

H: So tell me about how the Church Fathers relate to your own spirituality.

G: I think for me, is their work prompts me to ask this thing that I'm doing, what does it say about who I think God is? How am I joining all of these dots together? And conversely, how does what I believe about God shape my service in the Church and the world? It's the questions that are prompted by what they're writing because they can swiftly move from a very complex account of the doctrine of the Trinity. They can immediately swap from that to something very, very practical. And I think for me that going constant, going backwards and forwards and that constant conversation between how we might delineate a doctrine of God and then how we might go about serving God in the world, I just find it very, very helpful. So that's one of the prompts that hasn't gone away even after 12 years of reading sermons and all the rest, is it prompts that question in me.

And then the other, I think, is it's made me pray more. So once you're ordained in the Church of England, you commit to praying the daily office morning and evening and say that was sort of already happening and happened before. But I think this has made me think far more about how I'm praying, to whom I think I'm praying and sort of how it's shaping how I share, I guess, thoughts, dreams, hopes, sadnesses with God. Nazianzus wrote hundreds and hundreds of prayers and a lot of them express deep forms of suffering and misery. And I found that in certain phases of life and certainly the pandemic, the early stages of the pandemic, because I don't think we're fully out of this, but certainly those first few months of the pandemic where we were all sort of in absolute reeling and shock, I find those prayers really helpful because he doesn't hold back. And he doesn't hold back from saying sort of, I guess, the Psalm like lament prayers really of saying, you know, well, why aren't you doing anything, God? It's this utter sense of I just don't understand what's going on. And rather than trying to find nice, neat answers, he really just throws the pain on God. And I found that really helpful, actually, many times in life. But also the fact that he throws the questions at God, I also find really helpful because I think sometimes we like to have everything a little bit too sewn up. Especially things that can't always be sewn up neatly. And I appreciate the ambiguity that his way of praying and his way of thinking means I have to wrestle in that uncomfortable space of I don't have an answer and I think it's possible there isn't an answer.

H: Yeah, it's kind of that raw bringing everything untied up to God that is how your prayer has changed. Yeah, and knowing that God is big enough to hold all of that.

G: And it's sort of something that I probably knew before but couldn't articulate before. And I think what's been really good about working on these guys is they've helped me give a voice to my own thoughts about God. Like they believe so fully that God is infinitely everything. But it's almost like they don't have to take care of God in the way they talk about him, pray to him. They can just be completely real about their experience of everything.

H: Yeah.

G: Another way that it's really shifted me is as a preacher as well. There would be lots of other ways of doing this. But for me, reading the amount of emphasis that they put into how they construct a sermon rhetorically and how they persuade people of what it is they need to say. Yes. I found just that the amount of clearly very careful thought that has gone into all of that, not to mention the skill and the teaching and all that they know about classical rhetoric. And I find that has been really a good challenge for me in terms of not just thinking about the content of what I'm delivering, but also how I deliver it. And also how I construct the argument, say that we get to the end and people are really where I want them to be. Yeah. So it sort of gets rid of the reasonably dated model of the three point sermon, for example, which I realize it's a very controversial topic. I'm not about to try and dive into that and cause all sorts of problems. But I personally have found their lack of attention to the three points very, very helpful, because you really do come away with one overriding argument. And I think that's a much more persuasive way of preaching.

H: So how did you end up working on Satan? Is Satan in the church fathers? Tell me more about that.

G: It's a really good question, Hannah, because it wasn't the plan.

H: Okay. Okay. So what happened?

G: For some people, they might start out their academic life thinking, "Yes, I really want to work on the devil." That actually wasn't what I wanted to do. The proposal I submitted for my PhD, I wanted to work on deification. I was absolutely enthralled by the concept of it, coming from the kind of Christian background where that kind of language just wasn't used at all. It was brand new to me. I was very excited about it. And I was just like, "Let me get going with this. This is fantastic." So I did. I started a PhD on Gregory of Nazianzus's, I guess, vision of deification, theosis. And very, very quickly, I realized that he connects theosis very, very clearly to human beings being made according to the image of God. That was how he grounded it. And then I realized that we didn't really have a monograph or any kind of actual full-length research on Gregory of Nazianzus's vision of how it used to be made in the image of God, which felt like that was work I needed to do first before being able to go on to do the other stuff. So I did that work. And in the process of doing that work, I realized that when he talks about the image of God, quite a lot of the time he also talks about the devil. His vision of being human was this sort of complex mixture of, you know, we're becoming divine, we're engaged in this journey of theosis, wonderful, but also we're being pelted by the devil on a minute by minute basis. And so you end up with this really messy vision, I think, of human existence, which is quite a good description of lived experience. We're not just encountering beauty and truth on a daily basis.

H: I wish.

G: It is actually quite messy. And I think his vision of that, he used Satan to sum that up. That was the language and the concept that he used in order to just sum up that human existence is not always as we would wish it to be. And then there's a whole sort of web of conversations around sin and death and sort of all the other enemies, so to speak, wrapped into that. So the first book was simply trying to summarize what he was doing with the image of God. And then I felt like I hadn't really finished with what he was saying about the devil. And so I sort of kept reading in the background and then began to read Nyssa and Basil on it as well and found really interesting points of overlap and difference with all three of them on how they conceived this figure, which was then where I ended up with the book that I'm currently working on, which eventually will become something like *Problems with the Devil in Cappadocian Thought*. Sort of punning on the problem of evil, which they're not writing about in regulations for the devil. But I sort of thought, yeah, there are lots of problems here with both the devil himself for them and also the rise through what they're sort of thinking and grappling with. So that was how I ended up on it. I'm not planning on staying on this forever. But every time I sort of think, oh, I'm done now, then a few more thoughts emerge. So I may be working on the devil, I think probably for quite some time yet.

H: Okay, so tell me, like with our Anglican, Episcopalian hats on, we have the world, the flesh, and the devil in mind as enemies of the Christian faith. But we also have all this imagery that we've inherited from Milton and Dante about who the devil is, what the devil is, what are the Cappadocians imagining when they're talking about the devil? Is it a guy with horns? Is it a symbol? What's going on?

G: This is such a good question. The quick answer is there's lots of things going on. So it's not read for starters. And they don't describe him in the way that you would describe a picture. They don't sort of give you a, and this is what he looks like. What they tend to do is give you their idea of how he works and who he is by the way that they name him. And I still have a lot of work to do on this. But even now I have a list of 50 names.

H: Wow.

G: Which is, it just blew my mind when I added them up. I was just like, oh my goodness, that's a lot of different ways to envisage your enemy. What's tricky is discerning when they're talking about the devil and when they're personifying something else. But sometimes they'll refer to him as envy. Sometimes they'll refer to him as the adversary, the enemy. There's a lot of, this is my antagonist kind of language. What they don't tend to do is hold him responsible for all of the evil in the world. They tend to put that on human beings, that's what we messed up. But what they tend to see him as, as far as I can discern sort of a common theme with what they're all doing is he's definitely the enemy of salvation and therefore the enemy of

the church, as opposed to just a random bad being going around causing volcanoes or just that kind of thing to erupt. That's not where they see him at work.

So they don't discern his activity in say natural disasters at all. It's purely in how we think about often holiness, virtue, that kind of thing. The devil is the character who wants to stop Christians from becoming like God. It's how they envisage him and so most of the way that they would imagine him attacking is through temptation and deceiving people into thinking that something bad is actually good. And they're doing all of that in conversation with their interpretations as they've received a tradition through the genesis where he comes and he tempts Eve. But what you don't get so much, it doesn't come so strongly through as you might see with later writers, they're not quite so harsh on Eve. It's not all on her. It tends to be a mixture of sometimes they'll be like, well, he came and Adam was weak in this instance. And then other times you'll see them blaming Eve.

They tend to share the responsibility a little bit more. As a woman reading these, I find it quite reassuring to see the blame proportioned out nicely. But I think for me, that's what's been so interesting is just the lack of one vision. So this character is always wearing a mask. He's deceiving people. And so it's not so easy to sort of say, oh yeah, look, that's the devil. Because the whole point is that he's hidden. That's how he works. So his chief characteristic is to be sort of wily, really. Gregory of Nazianzus has called him the wily one several times. The wily one. Quite nice. I like that one. They have got some really super names.

But it's true, their naming of him that you can grasp what it is they're trying to say about how he works in the world. From the amount that I've read now, I do believe that for them, he's not a symbol, that it's an actual fallen angel. Because of course, angels are absolutely core to their worldview. It's an angel that totally went wrong. And therefore is at work in the world with a level of agency because that was what he was given at the beginning. Because again, that they're sort of building on a tradition that has been sort of thinking this through for a few hundred years, at least.

H: So how do people react to your work? Is there a difference between British and American reception of your work on Satan?

G: This is a really interesting question because the answer is both yes and no. In the beginning, when I was still a PhD student, and I began speaking at various conferences about the devil and suggesting that this was a figure that they didn't think was a personification of something, there was a lot of condescension in how I was received in the early stages. What I found was there was a shift, and this says a lot about the Academy, once I had completed my PhD. And after I published my first book, and it had been well reviewed, then I wasn't received with quite the same level of, "Oh, bless you, you dear little soul, thinking the devil might be real for these fathers." There were fewer patronizing comments, and people were a little bit more willing to engage and ask questions.

One thing that really shifted, though, for me, there was a pivotal conference that I went to, and it was where I met you, Hannah, for the first time.

H: Yes.

G: Yeah. So for so many reasons, it's pertinent to our conversation today. It was in 2018 at the Los Angeles Theology Conference. I was six months a newly minted doctor, so to speak, and I got a scholarship to fly out to Los Angeles and present really what was my first lurching into the next sort of idea and project, because the paper was more on the devil than it was on the image of God. I was presenting that paper, and I did notice a difference. And what I don't know is whether it's because of the nature of that specific conference, in that they had cultivated a really good atmosphere. But what was fascinating was fakes were really, really interested and asking lots and lots and lots of questions, and just fascinated really by what I was suggesting. And the nature of the questions made me think, "Oh, actually, maybe there is enough interest in this to make it worth my while to keep pursuing." And this is what I have wrestled with ever since, Hannah. One pastor said to me, "This is brilliant stuff. How do I communicate it to my congregation?"

And at that point in time, my immediate reaction was, "I have no idea, because I haven't got there yet with this. I'm on the process of trying to work that out for myself." But that question has stuck with me through everything that I'm doing and working on. And as I say, these books are not yet written. They're in the process of being written. But the first one will be very, very technical and simply aimed at an academic audience, which consists of PhD researchers and the like. And then the second one that I plan to write will be, "And what does this mean for the church?" Because his question was a real challenge to me because I couldn't answer it at the time. And I still find it very, very difficult to answer for all of the obvious reasons. But it's the question that lurks in the background always when I'm writing, and how does this relate to the church? It's brilliant.

H: That's the perfect guiding question for any theological query. I love it. So have you changed your mind about anything while doing this research?

G: Yes. I started out thinking that how they envisioned the devil was connected very strongly to ideas about problems of evil. But that was the big thing that changed for me, was the more I read, the more I realized that, "Ah, this has nothing to do with explicating suffering in the world. This is something very, very different." It meant I had to change both the title of the book and the direction of the book because it's what I had come in sort of thinking and assuming. So I changed my mind about that. I think I also changed my mind through the fact that they have so many different ways of describing who he is and how he's at work. I think I came away with fewer, very clear, specific, it can only be this, this, this kind of ideas, but with a much more complex vision of how this particular character might operate. What I didn't change my mind about is that I came in thinking, I think they have something to teach us. And that's still very much the case. In fact, more so, the more I go on, the more I think, "Huh, if I got

this, then I would see change in these and these and these ways." And so it's sort of, I'm more convicted as I go on that actually what they're saying is really, really insightful.

H: Yeah. A related question, what is your hope for this work? Is there something you'd like to see accomplished? And really, do you wish people would change their minds about something after having dug so deep into the Cappadocian's take on Satan?

G: Yes. Thinking as a Christian now, I'd love people to sort of read about it and think it through and come away if they think it's irrelevant to them that we don't need to bother about the devil anymore because science has shown that that's just not something we need to worry about. And all the reasons why people wouldn't want to think about that. Actually, this is something that might be worth grappling with.

And then to those that see sort of the devil in everything around every corner, I would love to see it shift and shape and bring some, I guess, boundaries and limits around how the devil works and what the devil can actually do. So the devil isn't going to be responsible for the airplane being late that I catch, for example. But he might be responsible for the fact that I'm envying my colleague over there who's just got a big pay rise.

H: Yeah.

G: I've still got another probably two years work to do on this before this thing is finished. So I'm sure there'll be more things by the end. But at the moment, they're the two things to sort of hopefully say that there's something meaningful in this, but also that the meaningfulness has limits.

H: Okay, so this might be a mean question to ask. But for our audience of Episcopal priests, what do they take to the pulpit? How do they translate some of this into communications, to their congregations? So I'm asking you that conference question.

G: Sure. In terms of the pulpit, it really depends on what the text is doing and saying. I'm thinking in lines of where we are with baptism in the Episcopal Church. So in the Church of England, we got rid of renouncing the devil some years ago.

H: Seriously, I didn't know that. We don't get rid of Satan anymore when we get baptized in the Church of England.

G: But in the Episcopal Church, I am glad to say we still renounce Satan and all of his works. Right. And I think for lots of people, that's difficult because they don't really believe in Satan or the red figure. Why would I renounce him? He's part of a fairy tale. I think in terms of then where it becomes useful for things like baptism is sort of asking yourself then, what does the name Satan in the respect with the research that I'm doing, what does that mean? So it means temptation, and temptation to envy your neighbor, temptation to sin in very particular ways. Greed, I mean, he doesn't lay it out.

It's not the seven deadly sins or anything like that. But there are some specific ways that Satan will tempt people. So in a sense, when we're thinking about renouncing Satan at baptism, what we're saying is I renounce collaborating with this figure on envying, on greed, on the things that actually will destroy me in the end.

H: And it's those things that look shiny and have been made to look shiny, like false goods, I think is the way I like to think about it.

G: Yeah. And he's basically the king of false goods.

H: Yeah.

G: So by sort of renouncing him, you're also then renouncing all that he rules over, if you like, thinking in terms of the old kingdom language of the Bible. So not a mean question. It's a good one because I keep thinking.

H: It's only mean in the sense that I feel like your answer to that will keep developing as you keep reading and thinking.

G: Absolutely. Someone wisely said to me when I was struggling over a research paper, "Nothing you write ever has to be your final word on the subject." And I would say the same about podcasts.

H: True.

G: I always sort of hope that no one holds me to what I'm saying today in 10 years' time.

H: Yeah. That you believe.

G: Yes, I do. But I possibly am always evolving in my views and ideas and thoughts and arguments.

H: These are officially our thoughts for All Hallows' Eve 2023, and they can change tomorrow.

G: Absolutely. There's going to be more thoughts.

H: Yeah.

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