

Rector's Sermon: Trinity Sunday (7 June)

In this time of pandemic, grasping the essence of the nature of God becomes urgent and important. How might an abstract-sounding church doctrine like the Holy Trinity be relevant to our present crisis? Does Trinity Sunday have anything to offer us as we navigate this pandemic together in our new online existence? Well let's first explore why we celebrate the Holy Trinity in the first place.

The word Trinity never actually appears in the Bible. Yet we hear, in our Gospel reading from St Matthew, of baptising new followers of Jesus in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and we read a different Trinitarian formulation in our Epistle from Second Corinthians, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

So how did those passages from scripture give birth to our understanding of God as Trinity? Well here we go – get your heresy antennae fully charged and alert! I'm going in!

Before God created everything we see and know, there was a communion of three separate persons of the Godhead who created us out of love, for love. Not just one being, but relationships and communion, before time and forever – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is why we were created: to be in healthy, loving, generative relationship with God and all creation. And out of this web of relationships comes both our salvation and the redemption of all creation.

We find that the first Christians were less concerned about doctrinal formulation than in following the way of Jesus. They patterned their daily lives in prayer and fasting, in service to others, and gathering for worship. Into that community, they baptised new followers using that same Trinitarian formula – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In time, they came to think through what it meant to speak of a God who is both one and three.

Scattered throughout the Bible there was both the idea of one God and the description of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Greek writers used the term trias, and the early church writer Tertullian coined the Latin word, Trinitas, or "Trinity". He also coined "Person" and "Substance" to describe what his mind saw when he contemplated the scriptures regarding the three-in-one God. Tertullian would say that there is a Trinity—a threeness—with three separate persons of a single substance.

The analogies that are often used to describe what we mean by the Holy Trinity always fall short and hence are heretical. Saint Patrick's three petals forming a single shamrock. John Wesley's example of three candles in a room, yet one light by which to read. We could speak of other analogies for the Holy Trinity, like H₂O being steam, water, and ice. In fact, when we use any single image, like the shamrock, we immediately slip into heresy. Better to use a number of images, knowing that while our words may help, they never will and never can clearly and precisely express the ineffable.

John Wesley put it this way: “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the triune God!” God is more than we can wrap our minds around, but it is important to note that the Trinity is not a mystery in the sense of a puzzle we cannot solve; the Holy Trinity is a mystery in that we see the truth of it, but there is much more than we can ever fully comprehend.

Using the word mystery, in this case, is closer to describing as mystery the love amongst humans. We know so much about those we love, and yet new occasions arise which reveal there was so much more to discover in those relationships, that we have only scratched the surface. We can and do know of God from God, through the revelation of scripture, through the way God is revealed in nature, and through that most perfect revelation of God, Jesus Christ. And yet, there is so much more than we know – a mystery that is deeper and wider than our minds can ever contain.

Early Christians looked to God as known in scripture and, with a nudge or two from that undivided Triune God, forged the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and then - and this is the clever bit - moving back from that revelation, they looked anew at the scripture and discovered how well it all fit together. Reading the Bible with new eyes, they saw that God was in communion with God’s own self before creation. God is a relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and then God creates all that is for relationship.

If we humans preferred to be alone and came together only rarely to procreate and then separate as some animals do, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity would have little to say for us. But we humans love to get together. This is a lesson we’ve learned afresh during this pandemic. We are, in fact, the very beings in communion we were created to be. Being separated by the coronavirus has not broken that sense of communion. Across the Church, people are finding ways to stay connected. Imperfect as they are, our new ways of joining together come from a deep longing which is at the very heart of Holy Trinity.

In this time of physical distancing, as we collectively seek to stop the spread of Covid 19, we are discovering so much more about this deep human longing for community and, while we are not worshipping in our church buildings, the essential truth of God as revealed in the Holy Trinity becomes all the more urgent - the truth that we long for community because we are all deeply and profoundly connected, through the Holy Trinity, to all creation; for at the very heart of the Holy Trinity, at the very heart of the Godhead, is loving, divine, dynamic relationship.

Covid 19 and the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests in America and across the world are shining a light on the reality that we live in a society with great divisions and inequalities and we all know of people who are struggling in this time of despair and anxiety. The love we are called to live out and mirror will surely therefore find expression in and through our reaching out to others in all the ways available to us. This is not something we do to earn the favour of the Holy Trinity. Rather, reaching out to others in love is how God the Holy Trinity blesses us, enabling us be conduits of grace to those we meet, whether we are virtually or physically present.

Early Christians put the practices of faith way ahead of trying to be precise about what they meant when referring to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If only we too, would prioritise the graceful and loving practices of our faith and trust enough to let our understanding catch up later.

The real grace of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is that it reveals that none of what we are called to do for others ever is reliant on us alone. The Holy Spirit is endlessly working through all our imperfect words and actions, connecting us to one another in love, regardless of race, gender, age, class or ability and when we connect to one another through loving, dynamic relationship we find that we are reflecting more fully our Triune God.

Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Three in One and One in Three. Blessed Holy Trinity. Amen.