

## **The Holy Trinity**

In the Bible God meets us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We call this the 'Trinity' – one God in three persons. Trinity is the central theme of today's address.

On the right-hand side of the screen, you can see a triangular diagram that tries to describe what this means. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and so on. This semi-logical diagram, taught to us in Seminary, comes from the western church of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It's far from telling the whole story!

On the left-hand side is a famous Russian icon which describes the Trinity as a three-person relationship, including room for us at the table. This image is from the eastern church of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. You can see it's quite different from the western attempt! Both Eastern and Western Christians believe in the same Trinity, but they visualise it quite differently.

As mortals, we can only ever see the tiniest glimpse of the immortal and invisible God. We know only what God shows us – without that we would know nothing. Who we see, in Scripture, is the Father, the Creator and sustainer of life; the Son, the Redemer; and the Spirit, the life-giver and sanctifier. This is the God we worship.

Twenty years ago, I took part in a national Jewish, Muslim and Christian dialogue. Each religion was asked to speak about an item of their faith that the others struggled most to understand. The Jews spoke on Zionism. The Muslims spoke on Jihad. And we Christians spoke about the Trinity. The others asked us how we could claim to worship the one true God when to them it seemed we had three gods!

That was one of the hardest dialogue days I took part in, because Jesus is the only reason that Trinity makes any sense. Without him and his cross, you can't even begin. Our Muslim friends accepted Jesus as a prophet, but for him to be God was totally unthinkable. They politely looked at us Christians as though we were crazy. Our Jewish friends thought of Jesus as a good man, but a misguided would-have-been, and they looked at us with pity. The God of Muslims and Jews is far away from us in heaven. They have no Jesus to cross the unbridgeable chasm between God and us.

Christians, on the other hand, know Jesus as their brother and friend who meets us here on earth and walks beside us on the way. As we get to know him, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we realise there is more to him - he is our crucified, risen and ascended Lord. Yes, he is truly human, but he is also much more. How can we describe him? Only God has the power to forgive sins. Only God has the power to raise the dead. Only God can give us rebirth and eternal life. If Jesus is nothing more than another human, if he is not raised from the dead, then we have nothing to boast about. God would remain remote and elusive. We would be just another religion trying to lift people up to some better standard of life.

Trinity, then, is how we describe the three-person God whom we meet in Jesus Christ. That's the central point of today's address.

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Centuries ago, this faith was distilled into the three ecumenical Creeds: the Nicene, the Apostles', and the Athanasian. We rarely use the Athanasian Creed because it's quite long and not so suited to worship services. All Christians share these three Creeds.

2025 is the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the earliest, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, or more simply the Nicene Creed. Last week's bulletin had a brief article about this anniversary. It was

the first attempt to describe the Trinity in a way that could be accepted across the entire church of that time.

We are familiar with its three sections:

Firstly, the Father, the Creator, or Maker, of heaven and earth. God also creates what we can't see. Wise people have always known that there is more to existence than the visible universe. Modern science is only just discovering how vast that is! Human beings, of course, also owe their existence to God, who is still involved in everything that keeps the universe, and us, ticking over.

Secondly, the Son, which is the longest section because this is the person we are closest to and know the most about. First, it establishes the divinity of Christ, a major point. The Son was not created. He did not come into being at any point. He always was and he always will be, the same as the Father. The Creed is very specific that it was the immortal God, as Jesus the Son, who came down to earth, dying here and being raised to life. God's own self died on the cross! This is an unimaginable sacrifice for human beings! It defies everything else we might think we know about who God is and what God can and can't do! And as a true human, Jesus then ascended to heaven. There he prays for us. As, true God and true man, incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended, Jesus will return at the end of time. We need not fear the end of all things, since we know the one who is coming and his love for us.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit, the life-giver. Equal with the Father and the Son in every way, and the one who inspires Holy Scripture. This is the three-in-one God of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and in this church, you and I will ascend to heaven to live with God forever. This Creedal faith has withstood the test of time. Some minor edits were done over the centuries, but with no change to the core doctrine. One edit, however, is worthy of note. In the third article Western Christians say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Roman church added 'and the Son' in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The eastern Orthodox church never accepted these words. It became a break between East and West that divided church, empire and society. That division is still here, 1,000 years later.

Yet faith in God as the Trinity is still firm. It is the test of true Christian teaching. Whatever a group or church says about itself, belief in God the Trinity as described in the Creed is essential. Those who does not fully honour God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not accepted as authentically Christian. The reason is simple – the Trinity confirms for us that Jesus Christ truly is our Lord and our Saviour.

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With our modern materialistic mindset, we are not as tuned into this kind of Trinitarian thinking as people once were. We just want everything to be simple. Why bother with Trinity? The word isn't in the Bible. Isn't it just complicated church-speak? No, it is not. Remember the main point of today's message. St Paul wrote that there are many gods and many lords.<sup>1</sup> How do we know which of these we worship? We know because the Lord and God revealed to us in the Bible is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God always works where and when God wills. God shows God's-self to us as God choses. When we try to describe the God revealed to us in Scripture, in Christ, and through faith, Trinity is our best effort. And that's important, because it tells us that Jesus truly is who he says he is, our Lord and our Saviour.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:5