

The Holy Trinity

2 Corinthians 13:14

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Robin Ellis was a professor at Trinity College in Oxford University and he was a fellow of Trinity College and he was once asked when he was outside the buildings by some visitors who were the four figures on the chapel roof and he thought for a moment he said oh they are the Holy Trinity and the visitors asked “Well, why are the four?” To which he replied, “Well, three persons and one God. And I think, for many, that just about explains what they know about this wonderful day that we're celebrating today - Trinity Sunday.

It's a conundrum really, isn't it? It's expressed in that hymn we sometimes sing firmly I believe and truly God is three and God is one. Incidentally, I discovered that Thomas Beckett in the 13th century was the first bishop who really encouraged churches to keep this Trinity Sunday. And it's become, obviously, a very established festival, not just in the Anglican Church, but in others also. It was often a day, Trinity Sunday, if you're a vicar, when you'd ask a visiting preacher to come along to spare you the trouble of having to speak on the Trinity. So, I immediately thought that Tom realised it was Trinity Sunday. But having got here, he hadn't realised at all. So, it was a miracle that actually I thought it was Trinity Sunday and said I would speak about the Trinity.

Anyway, I do have a text for you, and it is 2 Corinthians 13 and verse 14:

2 Corinthians 13:14

“¹⁴ May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Well, the Bible speaks of the Father as ‘God’, the Son as ‘God’, and the Spirit as ‘God’. So how can we as Christians speak of God as one God? And yet in the same phrase we speak about God, and then we say there are three persons. Actually, I don't think the disciples would ever have questioned it, because all the disciples were Jews, and they would have said ‘the Shema’ probably four or five times every day, which is in Deuteronomy 6:4:

Deuteronomy 6:4

“⁴ Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

The Jews were, and are, passionate monotheists. After Jesus rose from the dead and had been taken back into Heaven, his followers prayed to him and worshipped him, and they believed that he was holy God. And yet, for a hundred years or so, Christians were content with the idea that Jehovah is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, without trying to explain or make clear how the two can be reconciled. Well, the good news was, eventually, in the late second century, a church leader in North Africa, called Tertullian, arrived on the scene. He lived in Carthage, and he joined, a charismatic group called the Montanists. And they were great in prophecy and loved to speak in tongues and enjoy the gifts of the Spirit. But he was also a great theologian, and he was the first person to coin the term ‘Trinity’, meaning (or, trying to express) the three-ness of our Lord: the threefold link between Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. And he was also the first person to use the word ‘person’ or ‘persona’ from the Latin because he was writing in Latin in the Roman Empire at that time. So, he used the word persona to express the distinctiveness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But there's a problem with the word 'person', because it came to mean people. and we do not believe in three people. Our God is one God, not three persons or three people. That would be 'tritheism', and we are monotheists, believers in one God. Also, if you think about it, God the Father doesn't have a 'body'. The Holy Spirit doesn't have a 'body'. Only Jesus has a body. So, if you think about it carefully, it can't really be three separate individuals.

Now, unfortunately, at the time of Tertullian, there were Christians in North Africa who were called 'Modalists'. And they believed that God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit were 'modes' in which God operated. *Sometimes* he was the Father, *sometimes* he was the Son, and *sometimes* he became the Spirit. And the Modalists actually believed that first of all the world and the universe were ruled by God the Father and then he decided to come down to earth. So he was born in the person of Jesus of the Virgin Mary, and so he took over from the Father and he ruled the universe for a period. And then finally after his ascension, the Holy Spirit was poured out, and we're now in the governance of the Holy Spirit. So that was a problem with which Tertullian was also coping with as he tried to explain the Trinity to the people of Carthage.

Now we had a little bit later in the fourth century, when there were three great Christian leaders. They were all bishops, and they lived in the province of Cappadocia, which is in the middle of modern Turkey. They were wonderful people. They looked after their parishes, their dioceses with great pastoral care. And instead of speaking of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as persons, they preferred to use the word 'individualities', or 'distinctives'. So, they would say that the Father and the Son and the Spirit were 'distinctives', or they were 'individualities'. They were trying to find something that was less likely to cause people to think "we believe in three gods". And one of the things that they realised which helped them in this, is that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit always work together. They don't work separately. So, whatever the Father does, the Son does, and the Spirit does at the same time. And whatever Jesus does, the Father and the Spirit are also doing. And whatever the Holy Spirit does, the Father and Jesus are also doing it with him. They always work together.

So, for example, if you called out in prayer, “come, Holy Spirit”, you would also automatically get the Father and the Son along with that, because they are one being. Or if you use the prayer the early Christians often used, which is ‘Maranatha’, (“Come, Lord Jesus”), well, of course, the Father and the Spirit would be coming at the same time. Now these Cappadocians, also liked the term, a Greek word, perichorosis, (or, perichoresis), which means ‘interpenetration’. And so, they tried to explain the Trinity by explaining that the Father and the Son are ‘interlocked’. I'm sure you know the verse in John 14:11, where Jesus said:

John 14:11

“11 “...I am in the Father and the Father is in me;”

So, all three are in each other. They are distinct, but they are joined together. They are ‘interpenetrated’.

Now, interestingly enough, we've probably got favourite images of the Lord. Some of us may be happy that the Lord is like a father: one who guards us, guides us, keeps us, and feeds us. And we may be very happy to make our prayers to the Father, or to worship Father God. But for others who perhaps have been abused by a rotten father, or have had painful experience of a father who's mistreated us or never been present - Or in my case, my father died when I was two and my mother brought us up alone, so I never knew the presence of a father in the home. Others of us may be much more happy to address Jesus. I find actually, possibly because of my own background, I tend always to pray to Jesus, and I've always got an image of him in my mind. In my home church where I grew up, there was a wonderful picture of Jesus, really strong, warm, and affectionate looking, but very strong. And I think I've always carried that image, and possibly because of my upbringing, I've always found it much easier to engage with Jesus. But of course, I recognise that God is a loving Father. But some of us may be people of the Holy Spirit, and we may just think of the Lord's presence within us, that joy, that peace within. Actually, it doesn't really matter because when you pray to one, you're also praying to the same. We're praying to a Trinitarian, a tri-god, a three, a God who is three.

I also love the thing about the Cappadocians, they love this word perichoresis, which you also get the word 'concert' or 'chorus' from. It's nice to think of a concert with really happy music, really spilling out peace and joy, a concert. I think it's a wonderful way to think of our Lord, who is like a joyous concert, bringing peace and happiness. You know, "the joy of the Lord is our strength" (Nehemiah 8:10), and I think we really catch a glimpse of that in this wonderful Trinity. I often like to think of the Trinity in the delightful words of Sidney Carter's hymn, The Lord of the Dance:

*"Dance then wherever you may be.
I am the Lord of the dance", said he.
"I'll lead you all wherever you may be.
I'll lead you in the dance", said he.*

I love to think of the Lord, the joy of the Trinity rejoicing in itself. Well, there's a lot we could say. Oceans of books have been written about the Trinity, but I'd like to just pick out two people who I think have been helpful in recent times in helping us to think about the Trinity.

One you may perhaps have heard of is Karl Barth, (pronounced 'Bart') who was a professor for many years in the University of Geneva. He died in 1968, and he didn't like the word 'person' because it associated in his mind with 'people'. And so, he liked to think of the Trinity as 'ways of being'. Sometimes, God is conscious of being a son to us. Sometimes he's conscious of being a father in himself. Sometimes he's conscious that he is spirit. And I suppose we could think of ourselves in those terms. I am a father, but I am also a son, and so on. We can think of ourselves in different modes of being. So sometimes God is in the mode of the son who walks beside us, who's journeying with us, who forgives us - that it's okay that mess you've made up, you can start afresh from now. Sometimes he's alongside us and sometimes he's like a spirit within us. We feel that joy, that presence that God is within us. And so, I think thinking of the Trinity as modes of being is perhaps a helpful way, because God is one being, but we experience his being in different ways.

Well, I think we've already reminded ourselves that the Lord's ways are often more than we can understand. Paul says in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 11:33

“³³ Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!”

But having said that, I think there are three ways which may help us to grasp the Trinity. So just to conclude, I want to just set before you three ways that we could try to understand the Trinity a little more favourably.

First of all, by **explanation**. You've probably heard of St. Augustine, North African bishop (also from Carthage). Interestingly, many of our early theologians were black, African, North African people or from other parts of the Oriental world. And Augustine was struck by the fact that God is our creator. We are made in his image. That's what it says in Genesis 1. So, Augustine tried to think of God as being a perfect, superior version of human beings. And so, he began to think about the human frame. We have a body, we have a mind, and we have a spirit. And he also played with other aspects of humanity, like knowledge. He said, 'well, we have knowledge itself. We have knowledge in ourselves. We love ourselves and we remember ourselves.' And then he talked about the fact of existence, the fact that we exist, the fact that we know that we are existing and the fact that we love being existing. He does say these things are not particularly helpful. But nevertheless, I think his idea of looking at the human frame does help us a little.

I think of much greater significance is the American Nathan Wood, who wrote this book called *The Secret of the Universe, God, Man, and Matter*. And what he said there was, 'because God is the creator, and because he is a Trinity, that he's three in nature, we would therefore expect to see the world characterized by threeness'. And if you think about it, everything in this world is three-dimensional. Everything has a height, a length, and a breadth. And in a sense, it reflects the God who is our creator.

Psalm 8 reminds us that creation does bespeak the triune nature of God. The heavens do declare his handiwork. So, everything is three-dimensional. It could be said, if you remove any of one of those three dimensions, then our forms are lost. Similarly, if we took away one of the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, then God wouldn't be the same.

Well, there's been a number of Sunday school illustrations which people try to use to explain the Trinity, like ice, water and snow, or the shamrock or the three-leaf clover. They help us a little, but what they don't do is they don't show the distinctiveness. The three leaves are all the same. There's not distinctiveness there. And the same with the tree, the root and the fruit. Yes, there's three-ness, but there isn't really the distinctiveness. But yet, we can see it in ourselves and in the universe.

Secondly, I think we can understand the Trinity a little better by explaining or looking at the **Scripture**. 'Trinity' is not a biblical word, but nevertheless the Old and New Testament clearly teach that God is three in one. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all called God many times in the Old and New Testament. John describes Jesus as the true and eternal life. He talks about the Holy Spirit as God's Spirit. And one of the things that I discovered when I was preparing this is that in all the great salvation acts that we read about, all the things that contribute to our salvation, all three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are present.

- At the birth of Jesus, Mary was pregnant through the Holy Spirit, Matthew 1:18, and his name, Emmanuel, was announced from God by the angel Gabriel (Matthew 1:23).
- At the baptism of Jesus, Jesus came up out of the water. The Father spoke, "this is my beloved Son, and the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove."
 - o And when we baptize people, we baptize them in the name, singular, not plural, in the name, singular, of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We don't have three baptisms, we just have one baptism. There is one faith, one Lord, one baptism.
- At the death of Jesus, Jesus cried out, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then he yielded up his spirit into the Father's care.

- At the ascension of Jesus, he was exalted to the right hand of God. He received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place, and God seated Jesus beside him.
- At the return of Jesus, God the Father will send Jesus, and the Spirit will come, it says in Revelation 22:12. At the judgment, God will judge the world by Jesus, and the Holy Spirit will prove the world wrong of righteousness and judgment.

But, thirdly, the most important way, I believe, that we come to know the Trinity or explain the Trinity is by our **experience**. It's something that we know. We can't rationalize it very easily, but we know and we experience it. Sometimes we say the Athanasian Creed or the Apostles' Creed and it just goes through us. But when we stop and think about it, I think there's really a lot there. I remember once going into a restaurant for the first time and came across a dessert described as Eton Mess, which I hadn't had before. It's quite a few years now when that happened. But then the waitress kindly explained it to us, and I decided to go ahead and had this delicious combination of meringue, strawberries, and delicious cream. And it was one beautiful dish. But even amongst it, you could experience the difference, the different tastes between the different fruits and the cream.

Come back to a moment to Paul's letter, and we realise that the Trinity is a bit like that. It's something that we can't explain, but it's something that we really experience. And we taste it, different experiences. The Father's love, the Son's care and forgiveness, the Spirit's peace, and so on.

In the verse that I selected at the beginning, 2 Corinthians 13:14, it says "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ". I first learned about the Lord because of Jesus: the gracious, loving person that I read about in the Gospels. The one who cared for the poor and the needy; the one who loved and healed and cleansed the lepers, and so on. So, I first learned the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then as I continued as a Christian, I began to realise that God is also a God of love and that there's a fatherly care there for us. And then gradually, later on, I came to realise that there is a deeper experience. The Spirit is given to us when we become followers of Jesus, but we can let that grow in us, and then we feel and experience that peace, that love and joy.

So that's how it should be for us. We experience the graciousness or grace of Jesus, the human face of God. Then we feel the love of God, and finally the Holy Spirit is within us. And we also experience the Trinity in our worship. I love Ephesians 5:18-20:

Romans 11:33

“¹⁸ Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

When we come together, we do these three things all at the same time: We're filled with the Spirit, we sing to the Lord, and we give thanks to the Father. It's a lovely way of putting what our Trinity is to us.

And when we pray, we experience the Trinity. Sometimes we may pray to the Father with the help of the Son or in the Holy Spirit. But we feel all those three, all of the Trinity, are there every time we pray.

Also, I think it's good if you're in an evil situation. Perhaps you've encountered evil people or evil situations or evil disease, or something. I think it's very good that we take our hold and realize that the Lord is a Trinity, a great strength. I love those famous breastplate prayers that Patrick used to pray:

*I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity.
I believe the Trinity in unity, the creator of the universe.*

And it is said, (probably, it may be a legend), that when Patrick first went into Ireland to bring the gospel there and encountered the Druids, that he immediately spoke out and called on the Trinity to give him protection. And they were great Trinitarian people, the early Celts. And they understood the strength and the power that there is. and I think we need to recognize that we have power in the Trinity.

So, in summary, the doctrine of the Trinity is trying to say that the Father and the Son, and the Spirit, they're *all* Lord. They're *all* God. And yet they are distinctive. And we, as C.S. Lewis and others point out, we can experience the Trinity. We experience the Lord in three ways. Sometimes he comes to us, and we experience him as a loving father. Sometimes he is the son walking alongside us, encouraging us, putting his hand on our shoulders and helping us. And sometimes he's that Spirit within us who helps us to rejoice.

I close with some words from Charles Spurgeon:

"It needs the Trinity to make a Christian.

It needs the Trinity to cheer a Christian.

It needs the Trinity to complete a Christian.

And it needs the Trinity to create in a Christian the hope of glory."



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