

# THREE PERSONS: ONE GOD

*(Romans 5.1-5 and John 16.12-15)*

We are going to be dealing with a tough subject so I thought that I would start this sermon with a joke about the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost as we used to know it.

I could find hundreds of jokes about lawyers (I wonder why?) and lots about vicars, but I could find only one about the Trinity. Here it is. If you understand it all, you are allowed, and even encouraged, to groan.

A young girl who had never been to church before, was visiting a churchgoing family. They took her to their morning service and, upon their return home, asked her what she thought about the service. She said it was OK but she could not understand why the whole west coast was not included. Puzzled, the family asked her what she meant. Well, she said, the man at the front kept talking about the Father, the Son and the whole east coast.

*May the grace of Christ our Saviour and the Father's boundless love, with the Holy Spirit's favour, rest upon us from above.* We've just heard these words sung. They were probably inspired by the last verse of St. Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth which we often use in blessing each other. We refer to them as 'The Grace.' We have there a mention of what we know as the three persons of the Trinity.

A question: Where in the Bible will you find the word *Trinity*? Any offers? You are right to hold back because that word is not there in the Bible.

So where does it come from?

The early church was puzzled. When I say 'the early church' I am not talking about St. Paul's time but perhaps 200 plus years later. But why were the early church fathers puzzled?

Let's look at few passages from the Bible to see if we can find a clue to their puzzlement.

In our Gospel reading we have Jesus saying that the Spirit of Truth will come with a job to do – to guide the disciples into all truth, taking that truth from Jesus. Jesus goes on to say that what belongs to his Father also belongs to him - that is Jesus. So, in just three verses we have a connection between the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

In St. Matthew's Gospel we have the story in chapter 3 of Jesus' baptism. Jesus comes out of the water and as he does so heaven is opened and he sees the Spirit of God coming down in the form of a dove. Then there's a voice from heaven: *This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.* So again, this time in only two verses (v16 and 17) we have that link between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I've quoted from St. Paul's interweaving of the three in the words from our anthem. In our reading from Romans he says we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ and that God has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

St. Peter begins his first letter in this way:

To God's select exiles.....who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.

St. Mathew ends his gospel with these familiar words:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And, again, those words which we use quite often in blessing each other, coming at the end of Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth:

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

And there are lots of references to just two of the three - the Father and the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

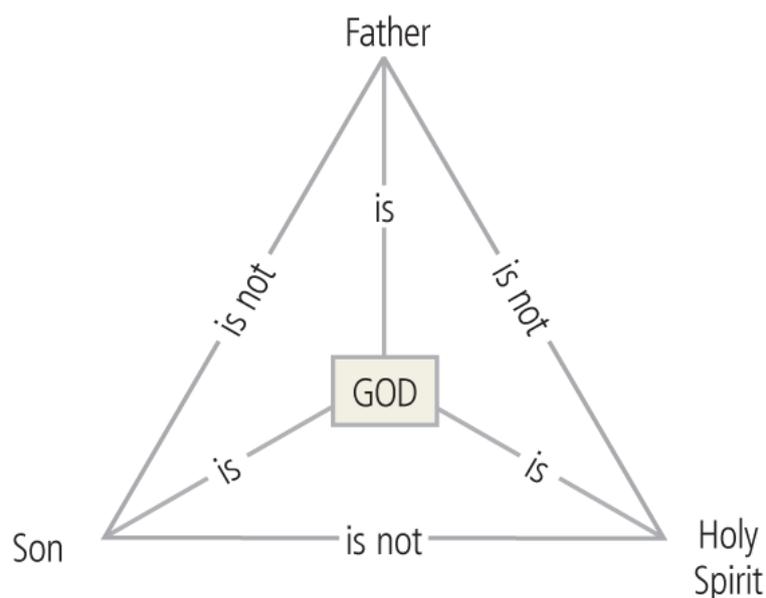
What were those early Christians to make of all this? It was not just the bits from the Bible. It was the closeness they actually experienced – closeness to God their creator and loving Father, closeness to Jesus their saviour through his death and resurrection and closeness to the Holy Spirit whom they felt guiding their lives.

Even St Augustine of Hippo as late as 300 AD said this:

*When the question is asked 'three what?', human language labours altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer however is given; 'three persons', not that it might be spoken but that it might be left unspoken'* In other words it is essentially sensed and experienced.

Gradually, to explain both the Bible words and their own experiences there evolved the doctrine of the Trinity. But how can the three elements of the Trinity fit together? How can the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be at the same time, three people and one person?

Does the picture on the screen help? This is how in 1315 a pioneering missionary to Muslims explained the Trinity - a series of triangles fitting together.



Let's try something else.

How would people describe me? I guess some would describe me as about 5ft 9 tall with springy white hair, clean shaven and wearing glasses. But some would describe me as married to Gill, with a brother who lives in the Lake District. They would tell you that I have two sons and four grandchildren two of whom are adopted and two of whom are currently at university. Others would describe me as being involved with the Wilson Centre, as being a service leader and occasional preacher and as someone who welcomes people to Messy Church and gets them to sign in.

Why the difference in these descriptions? It's because people know me in different contexts and experience me in different areas of life. At different times I will be perceived and experienced in different ways by different people. So am I three different people? Of course I am not. I am the same person – just experienced in different contexts.

Outside the sun is shining. If I were to suggest we all go outside and look directly into the sun, you would say, *Don't be stupid Brian, it is far too bright for us to do that, we would be blinded.* And, of course, you would be right. But in its blinding glory we could compare it to God the Father. And even though it might be hidden by clouds or out of sight over the other side of the world at night, we know it is still there. The sun is permanent.

The sun is what provides the world with light and that light gives life to the world enabling us to live and move. Even on the darkest day there is light and that light comes from the sun. Jesus is the light of the world.

The sun provides us with warmth. Without it the world would be cold and dead. In the warmth we grow and live. Similarly we grow and live in the warmth of the Holy Spirit.

The sun - glory, light and warmth. We speak of them as three different things and yet they are inextricable each from the others. One would not exist without the others.

God is good at surprises. Beryl, here in the Choral Group had loaned me a book by our former Bishop, Tom Wright. I was ploughing through it - it was not an easy read. Then came the surprise. I was thinking how the Trinity

showed God's great love in its three different aspects and that very day I got to a particular passage in the book. I want to quote it now because it said, much more eloquently than I could, what I had been struggling to express.

This is what Tom Wright says: Our 'big story' is not a power story. It isn't designed to gain money, sex or power for ourselves, though those temptations will always lie close at hand. It is a love story – God's love story, operating through Jesus, and then by the Spirit, through Jesus' followers. This is the building of the church against which the powers of hell and, for that matter, destruction, cannot prevail.

So there it is; the Trinity – three persons, one God.

Let me end with a prayer:

In the mystery of your Godhead you have revealed to us the fulness of your divine glory. We praise you Father, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, three persons, equal in majesty, undivided in splendour, yet one Lord, one God, ever to be worshipped and adored. Amen