

THE MYSTERY OF TRINITY

Isaiah 40. 12-17, 27-31

2 Corinthians 13. 11-13

Matthew 28. 16-29

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity, which is an unusual feast in the Church calendar in that it encourages us to focus on a doctrine of the Church, rather than commemorate specific events in the life of our Lord or the seasons that prepare for them or follow them. Trinity Sunday celebrates a *doctrine*, and not an *event*. It celebrates the unfathomable mystery of God's being as Holy Trinity. It is a day to celebrate the one, eternal, incomprehensible God, who is one and yet who is three. Both three and one, how confusing is that?

Yet this doctrine is considered to be one of the essential tenets of our Christian faith. When we think about what all Christians believe, there are two doctrines which are foundational within what we call the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. One of these two foundational doctrines is the Incarnation, that somehow Jesus is also Emmanuel, God with us. The second doctrine is that of the Trinity, which proclaims that the same God who is God over us as God the Father and Creator, is God with us and for us as the incarnate Word and Son; and is also God within and among us as God the Holy Spirit.

The word 'Trinity' does not occur in the Scriptures per se, but two of our scripture readings appointed for today use the Trinitarian formula, which is given as a benediction in St Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, and which is also included in the Baptismal command given in the gospel of St Matthew.

As we think and talk about this important theological concept, we need to be wary of several dangers to be avoided. One is to take the approach that God is so far beyond us, and so transcendent, that we can really know nothing about God at all. The other is to imagine that we have (with our spiritual wisdom and intelligence) captured the inscrutable character of God and thus made God in our image, rather than the other way round. It is thus crucial to remember that the doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a *mystery*, and that we are talking about something that we will never fully understand this side of heaven. Language will always be inadequate to describe God. The doctrine of the Trinity does not try to explain the mystery; rather, it preserves a mystery that cannot be explained.

I am reminded of a story that was told by the late Cardinal Cushing, the former Roman Catholic Archbishop of Boston in America. On one occasion, Cardinal Cushing was administering the last rites to a man who had collapsed in a general store. Following his usual custom, Cushing knelt by the man and asked, 'Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?' The Cardinal said that the man roused a bit, opened an eye, looked at him and said, 'Here I am dying, and you ask me a riddle.'

Remember when you were a child, or whenever you first heard about God? The first word I remember hearing that was associated with God was 'love'. My first definition of God was, 'God is love'. And indeed, the first epistle of St John states that 'God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them' (4. 16b). In love, God the Father grants us grace and peace through his Son Jesus Christ; and God pours his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God, who is at once our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, delights to give to us the holy love of the triune God; and he invites us to rejoice in that love.

We most often use the words 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' to speak of the three persons of the Trinity. But such terms are incomplete and inadequate when describing the totality of who God is. Perhaps as we consider the concept of the Holy Trinity today, we could simply remember this definition: 'The Trinity is God's love overflowing'. God's love is like a huge fountain of water: it is unstoppable, relentless, and it is free in its endless outpouring. As it flows, it searches for the deepest possible communication and relationship with every creature on earth. The doctrine of the Trinity should never be dry. It should be drenched with the ocean of divine love in which we find ourselves.

Many images have been used to help us better understand what the Three in One and One in Three are meant to convey. Like all human language, they are incomplete; but perhaps one of these analogies will be helpful.

Think, for example, of the three states in which we find the molecule made up of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen. We know and recognise H₂O as water, whether it is frozen as ice, heated to become steam or flowing as a liquid. How different they appear, and yet they are the same composition.

Another analogy is to think about the various roles that each one of us has, even though we are just one person. I am a father; I am a husband; and I am a Vicar (more recently Vice-Dean); and although I act in multiple roles, I am still John. St Augustine explained the concept using the example of a tree. He wrote that a tree's root is wood; its trunk is wood; and its branches are wood; one wood, one substance, but three different roles or functions. The roots support and ground the tree; the trunk provides stability and structure; and the branches of the tree reach out into the world.

When we consider and think of the Trinity, it is also very helpful to think about their relationship. Interestingly enough, in the Western Christian Church, this relationship has often been illustrated by using a triangle; but this representation is faulty because it can lead people to believe that God the Father is at the top of the triangle and is therefore superior to the others.

In the Eastern Christian Church, on the other hand, the Trinity has often depicted the Trinity as three persons in a circle, seated together around a table. This is the image that is given in a very famous icon painted by Andrei Rublev, a Russian painter who lived in the 15th century.¹ I am sure that many of you have seen pictures of this icon, as it is now hailed as a masterpiece throughout the world.

The Trinity ‘in a circle’ was no doubt the image that John of Damascus, a Greek theologian who lived in the 7th century, had in his mind when he thought about the relationship of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. John developed a concept concerning the Trinity that is today called *perichoresis*. In Greek, ‘peri’ means ‘around’, as in a perimeter; and ‘choresis’ means ‘to dance’, as in choreography. Perichoresis pictures the three Persons of the Trinity holding hands and dancing together in harmonious, joyful freedom. They are deeply one, yet they are three. They are unified in one intimate, indissoluble substance, yet they are recognisable community. The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is the unity of a community of Persons who love each other and who live in harmony.

If in God’s own deepest inner being, he is such a community-seeking God, then that also describes who he is in relation to us. The Holy Trinity is not a mathematical problem to be solved, but a mystery of the faith that we confess. God the Father,

¹ According to some, there is a place at the front of the table in Rublev’s icon where there used to be a mirror, so that the person looking at the icon had a place at the table as well.

God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are one as a divine community, who live with, and in, and for one another in mutual openness, freedom and self-giving love.

In the Trinity, God is in a relationship of self-giving love; and you and I (along with the Church-at-large) are invited to take part in the life and love of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract theory, but a practical doctrine, one that we are called to put into practice in all aspects of our lives. We are invited to enter into God's community-forming love; you and I are invited to enter into the dance.

Amen.