

Reflection – Pastor Seng Eng Low
at Lindfield Uniting Church on Trinity Sunday, 12th June 2022.

As I mentioned in my introduction, the Trinity is a Christian doctrine, central to our faith. We worship God as the Three-in-One. (slide 1)



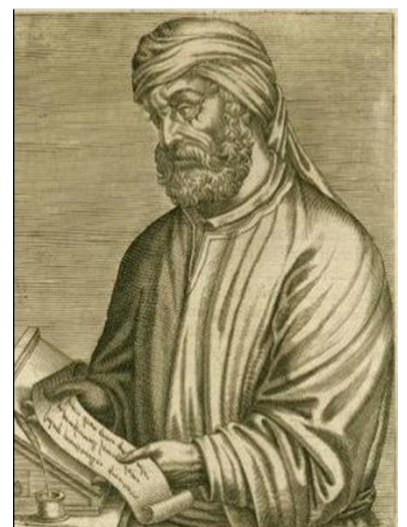
Here we have a pretty classic image of the Trinity with Creator God on the right, holding the earth, Christ on the left, holding a cross and the Holy Spirit depicted as a dove.

The Trinity is unique to Christianity. My Muslim friend worships Allah, and in the Quran it is said of Allah: 'Your God is One God, there is no God except Him, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate'. The Jewish faith, from which Christianity arose, saw God as One. Their daily prayer, the 'shema', which they recite each day, morning and evening is: 'Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. This idea that there is only one God is fundamental to their faith.

But in Christianity, we celebrate God as Trinity or the Three-in-One. Did you know that the word 'Trinity' does not appear in the Bible? The term 'Trinity' was first used by the Christian writer Tertullian (slide 2).

He lived in Carthage, North Africa and was thought to be a Berber (sort of an Arab). He lived from 155AD-220 AD, so the word 'Trinity' was only used to describe the Christian God, about 200 years after Christ.

But why did the doctrine of the Trinity come about at all? After all, the Jewish faith proclaims that God is One, so why complicate matters, why say that God is actually 3 in 1? Well, although the Bible doesn't use the word 'Trinity', there are certain passages that seem to point to the Trinity.



Perhaps the clearest expression to the Trinitarian nature of God is seen in Matthew 28:19. Before Jesus ascends to heaven, returning to the Father, he says this to the disciples: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' That's pretty straightforward.

There are some other passages (not so straightforward) that also seem to hint at this 3-fold nature of God, but we might have to work harder to see this. For example, In Genesis, God is named as Creator. From Genesis 1: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light!' and there was light.' In this passage, we hear that before God created anything, the Spirit was already there with him, hovering over the waters of chaos. So here we have God and the Spirit who existed before everything.

In John's gospel, we hear: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.' So along with the Spirit, the Word was also there with God in the beginning. So now, we have the three: God, the Spirit and the Word who were there before anything was created. Later on in John's gospel, we are told, that the Word who was with God at the beginning, became flesh and made his dwelling among us. This was Jesus of course.

So putting all this together, we have Creator God, and the Spirit, and the Word (that is, Jesus) together at the beginning before anything else came into being- the Holy Trinity.

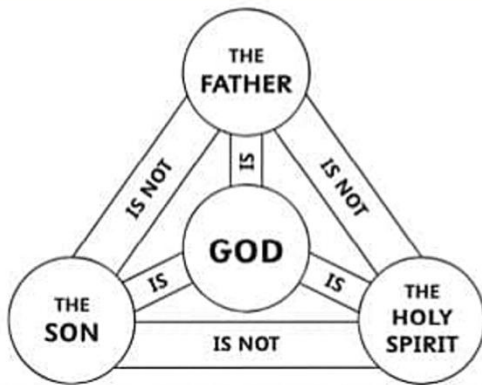
In today's gospel reading, we have this: Jesus is going back to the Father but he tells the disciples that after he is gone, the Spirit of Truth is coming to guide them. And the Spirit will declare only what he hears from Jesus, who in turn has it all from the Father. So there you have it: Jesus, the Spirit of truth and the Father. 3 separate persons, but one God, because they are completely in tune with one another.

So in the Bible, you'll be able to find them: these sometimes quite subtle allusions of the three-fold nature of God. But I don't think that the doctrine of the Trinity arose merely to explain away these handful of Bible verses. Rather, before the doctrine of the Trinity, there was the *experience* of the Trinity. The early church experienced God in certain very different ways and in trying to describe what they experienced, to make sense of their experience, the doctrine emerged. The doctrine of the Trinity explains why our diverse experiences can all still be about the *one* God.

The doctrine explains how the mystery of God the mighty Creator of the cosmos, whose very word brought forth all things, is the same mystery of the vulnerable God, who walked among us and died on a cross, and is the same mystery of the whispering, nudging Spirit of God within us, guiding us into all truth. The same mystery, the same God. The doctrine of the Trinity is our attempt to make sense of our experience of God. It doesn't explain everything, but then that's not so

surprising. How could our human theories and concepts hope to fully capture the nature of God? God can never be fully explained, and that's ok.

Here is a diagram that might help some of us to understand the Trinity. (Slide 3)



So we have the doctrine of the Trinity. Celebrated on Trinity Sunday. Besides this special Sunday, how often do you think about the Trinity? What difference does this doctrine make to our daily lives, our day-to-day journey of faith? What is the use of this doctrine?

For me the most important thing about the doctrine of the Trinity this: from the beginning, before anything was created, God already existed as 3 persons. God existed not as a solitary figure that we are prone to imagining, sitting on a throne in splendour, but as a *community* of 3 persons united in fellowship, peace, harmony, co-operation, and mutual love. The Trinity as a concept may not be easily understood, but it expresses something fundamental about God: that God is first and foremost a co-operating, loving and creative *community*. The very first community that existed.

(Slide 4) The famous Christian writer CS Lewis wrote this: “You would have heard the saying ‘God is love’. All kinds of people are fond of repeating this statement. But the words God is love have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. So if God was a single person before he created the world, then he was not love.”



Another writer, C Baxter Kruger says this: ‘The doctrine of the Trinity means that relationship, that fellowship, that togetherness and sharing, that self-giving and other centeredness are not afterthoughts with God, but the deepest truth about the being of God.’ God is by nature *relational*, the dynamic power of love that was in the very beginning and never ends.

Moreover, that dynamic relationship that is the Trinity is not a *closed* community, because God became human, walked among us, and invited us into that community. Jesus came, not to command us to act loving, nor to condemn us for failing to love. He came as the human incarnation of divine love, to invite us into that love, to enter into the divine community and be transfigured. What an amazing thought: that Jesus came to invite us to *join* the community of the Trinity.

So if the idea that God is community is fundamental to our faith, how does this help us in our daily life? There are some Christians who say, that their faith is a private matter, that they pray and read the Bible on their own, and watch 'Songs of Praise' every Sunday. And so, they say they don't need to go to church or meet with other Christians to practise their faith. But if we understand that God is first and foremost a community, then *engaging in community* becomes a sacred task in which we *reflect* God. Community is to be cherished because that is what God *is*!

And what should our Christian communities be like? Our church communities should mirror the qualities of the Trinitarian community, where mutuality, reciprocity, harmony and love characterize how we relate to one another. (slide 5)



This is perhaps the most famous icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev, in which the three persons of God, sit gazing at each other in loving regard. Which is how we in the church community should relate to one another.

It was Aristotle who first said: 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.' This is true for our Trinitarian God and is also true for Christian communities. (Slide 6)

Together, we are like dancers in a beautifully choreographed dance; much more together than if we were dancing on our own. Can you see that the dancers together create more? Through community, we become more than we could be on our own. When we meet together, we are able to encourage and challenge one another, we are able to learn from one another, and our gifts and abilities can complement each other, and together, we are able to accomplish so much more than we could on our own. You know this: together, this community, with the help of other likeminded people, is able to raise funds to help those in need.



And beyond the church, we can spread the principles of Christian community as we participate in the wider world. You may have heard it said that Australia is a multicultural society and so we must tolerate one another. Tolerating one another is what modern democracy is about. But as followers of the Trinitarian God, we seek to do much more than tolerate one another. The Three Persons of the Holy Trinity don't just tolerate one another! They relate to one another in loving regard and co-operation, they delight in one another.

(slide 7)



I am most encouraged that the recent Federal election has resulted in the most diverse parliament in the history of Australian politics. (I'm sorry I couldn't get a photo of all MPs but of the Labour Part only.) But even among them, we can see greater gender equality, more Indigenous representation, more MPs from culturally diverse backgrounds. Surely this diversity has the potential to enrich and inform the discourse, to better serve all Australians?

But this will not happen if the various MPs merely *tolerate* one another. PM Albanese has expressed a desire for greater cooperation and collegiality in the Parliament, so that the business of government can progress. This would require the different factions of the government to stop bickering, and even to go beyond merely tolerating one another. Is it too much to hope that our elected representatives could find a way to work together in mutual respect, and in a self-giving, other-receiving way? Is it possible for mere mortals to rise above their human instincts and relate to one another in the same way that the 3 persons of the Trinity relate to one another?

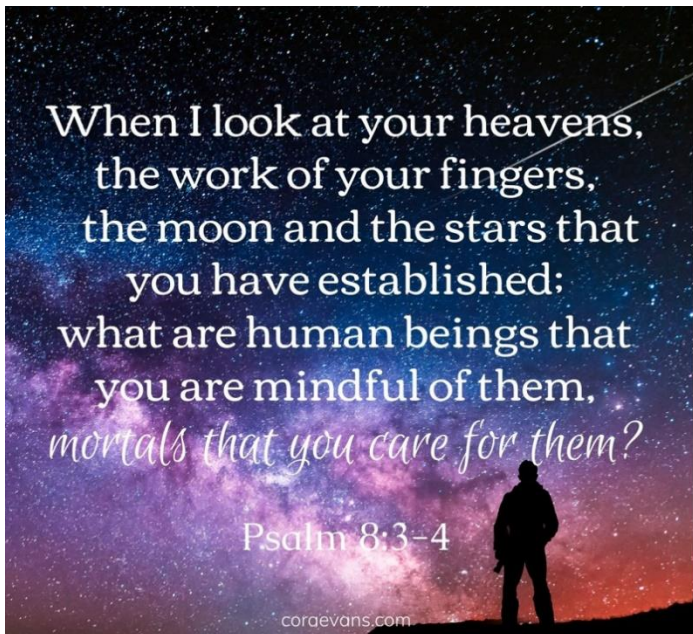
(Slide 8 - see next page)

Our Psalm for today says this:

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴ what are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honour.'



What an amazing privilege! God has chosen to grant us humans the glory and honour of becoming only a little lower than Godself, and to be able to participate in the act of creation and recreation, working beside God, and delighting with God in all the works of God's hands. We have this potential within us if we could but see it and believe in it and aspire to it!

In today's gospel reading, as Jesus prepares to leave the disciples he says this: 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.' (slide 9)

So today, the Spirit of truth, the third person of the Trinity continues to be with us, leading us forward, inviting us to join in the eternal dance of the Trinity. God is inviting us- will we join the dance? Amen

