

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	15 June 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Trinity Sunday
Preacher:	The Lord Bishop of Chichester, The Rt Revd Dr Martin Warner

Trinity Sunday is traditionally regarded as a bit of a nightmare for preachers because it seems like an anti-climax. Over the past weeks, we've been through the the great fifty day period which stretches from our celebration of the resurrection at Easter to our celebration of the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And then finally, as it were to wrap this up, we get Trinity Sunday. Sometimes it seems as though the richness of those great narratives, those great stories of the Christian faith are, on Trinity Sunday, flattened out into a rather obscure doctrine that basically belongs in a Theology text book. As an antidote to any sort of feeling like this, let me try to outline just a few things about the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity.

According to this very central Christian teaching, God is one God. This belief is one we share with the other monotheistic faiths, notably Judaism and Islam. However, as orthodox Christians we believe that the one God exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That word 'persons' is a little difficult because the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not persons as you and I are persons. Perhaps the nearest we can get is that they are three different expressions of the one God, and they each show us vital things about his nature.

First of all, we call God 'Father': this points us to what we might call God's transcendence: that is that God is great, that he is other. God is not a projection of our wishes and dreams and fantasies, but rather he is the almighty Father, creator of heaven and earth: before us and beyond us in every way. God is not just another thing or being somewhere out in the universe: rather he is the source of all things, the ground of all being.

And calling God 'Father' also has another side to it: a relational side. It means that God relates to me as, hopefully, a human father does. Jesus calls God 'Father' and teaches his disciples to do the same, for example when they pray

they are to say 'our Father who art in heaven'. And, in his teaching, he speaks of God as a Father who always wants to greet back his children, even when they have strayed a long way away from him.

Jesus Christ, the second 'Person' of the Trinity is what St John in the New Testament calls the 'Word' of the Father: what the Father wants to say to us, what he wants to communicate with us, he does supremely in Jesus his Word. 'Long ago', said the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, 'God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son'.

And, as well as being the Word of the Father, Christ, the second person of the Trinity is also the perfect image of the Father because he and the Father are entirely one in their Trinity. We are necessarily unable to see the God who is above and beyond us, but we do see Jesus, everything that we know about Jesus gives us a perfect picture, an exact picture of what he is like. 'No one has ever seen God', writes St John, 'It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known'. So when in the gospels we see Jesus healing people, loving them, forgiving them, restoring them, raising them up, giving himself for them, then we know that this is exactly what God is like and what he always wants to do.

The third person of the Trinity is God the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit can be seen as God's *active presence*, for the Spirit is active like the wind and flames of Pentecost; active in the Church, in the Scriptures and in the sacraments and active also throughout the world, wherever God is at work.

The Holy Spirit, writes St Paul, pours love into our hearts; enables us to love in the way that God has loved us. Indeed, the Spirit is often identified with the very love that binds together the Father and the Son into a perfect unity of love.

All these things and many more then can be said about the three 'persons' of the Trinity. Yet, it remains notoriously difficult to get your head around how God can be three and one at the same time and all explanations and analogies tend to fail in some way. But perhaps I can finish with a picture of the Trinity by the novelist and crime writer Dorothy L. Sayers which I think helps us to see how it is possible to think of being three and one at the same time.

Imagine you are doing a painting or cooking a meal or playing a piece of music. Sayers said that the *Idea* of it that you have in your mind, before you get started is a bit like God the Father: perfect and complete in itself, not lacking anything.

Now think of the *Energy*: the work you put in to making that vision a reality in the world; the sweat and passion it takes to paint something good or cook something nice or play piece of music and really get it right. For Sayers, that Energy corresponds to God the Son who comes from the Father and perfectly expresses what the Father is like and carries out his mission.

And finally think of the *Power* that your work has when other people experience it. It doesn't just sit there: somebody loves your painting or enjoys the meal you've cooked or the tune you've played – or at least hopefully they do: they absorb it; it becomes part of them. That Power corresponds to the Holy Spirit, active in the world and in the hearts of men and women.

The Idea, the Energy and the Power are all in a way different but they are part of the one work. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are different but they are expressions of the one God whom we worship and who has enfolded us into his own life. Dimly, we may come to understand this mystery but then, as St Augustine of Hippo said over fifteen hundred years ago, 'if you could understand it, then it wouldn't be God'.