

## The Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Tony Haines | 14<sup>th</sup> September 2025

### 2 Corinthians 13:14

Thanks for giving me a topic that the great theological minds have been working on for the last two millennia..."In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen." Or as the Pope would say, "In nomine patris, et filii, et spiritus sancti, Amen." That's the first time that's been said for a long time, I would imagine, here at All Saints. But it is Pope Leo's 70th birthday today, so I thought it would be appropriate to say that.

It's a tough subject for a retired geography teacher to be tackling, but lovely Tom Peryer warned me that it might be helpful to actually be reminded of what the 39 Articles say about our belief in God. They are the articles of our faith that were written in the middle of the 16th century. The first of the articles of our faith as Anglican worshippers reads...

"There is but one living and true God, ever-lasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

Of course, the word 'Trinity' is *not biblical*. It's not a biblical word - but it's a very biblical idea. The idea was dreamt up or used for the very first time by a man called Theophilus of Antioch, who decided that the main way in which the New Testament talks about God was in three different ways, but in a unity.

But this was well after all of the apostles who'd followed Jesus had passed away. And it was well after all the New Testament books had been written. So, the idea of the Trinity came relatively late. There were many different ideas floating around at that time about the nature of God. And there were some difficult ideas because if God is one, those with a Jewish background would find it very difficult to consider that Jesus was God. "How can there be one God if someone who we follow as a Rabbi claimed to be one with God?" And where does that fit in with the Spirit, who is also God?

And so, this was a matter of serious debate amongst very bright Christians a very long time ago. Until this particular man called Arius the Presbyter came along with an idea that actually Jesus was not equivalent to God, because he was tempted and because he died and because he was a human being - he could not have always existed. He must have been made by God later. So, he said, "the son who is tempted and dies, however exalted he may be, is not to be equal to the immutable father. If he is other than the Father, he is inferior."

And this is the same view actually of a lot of people today. Unitarians would say this same thing, which is Jesus is not God but underneath god inferior to god and so of course would Jehovah's witnesses say the same thing and those debates and disagreements went on and on for a long time until in the year 325, Emperor Constantine called together all of the bishops of the Christian world of the Roman Empire at that time at a place called Nicaea, which you'll see in that northwestern part of what is now Turkey. And in the end, after about two months, it was in May and June of the year 325, the Nicene Creed, which is the one that is held by all the major denominations in Christendom - Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc. - all agree. And it's the foundation of faith.

It's interesting that earlier this year, 1,700 years after the treaty, the Council of Nicaea met, our former rector, Patrick Whitworth, held a pilgrimage to Nicaea to celebrate what was discussed and what was eventually agreed upon in that particular place. And he celebrated with Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Anglicans. And they said the Nicene Creed in Greek and in English - it must have been quite an event. And basically, what the Council of Nicaea agreed was that there was one God who exists in three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are co-eternal equally, and they are omnipotent. They are distinct from one another.

How do we get our heads around this? They're one God, distinct from each other. The Father has no source. The Son is born of the substance of the Father. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This is easy stuff, isn't it? "Though distinct three persons cannot be divided from another in being or in operation" they said. Anyway, here we are, 1700 years later, trying to grapple with the meaning of all of that. It seems academic and rarefied and just words, really.

How are we to understand and explain to our friends this pretty complex idea? I mean, many people struggle with the idea of belief in God in general. And then to say "Well, actually, our God is a Trinity" etc. etc. And yet we do believe in Jesus. We do believe in the Holy Spirit. And we do believe in the Father, all of whom are invisible. That makes it difficult for us to convey to other people, doesn't it?

And, of course, the basis of that is the Bible. And so, we have these words from Genesis.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the water. And God said, “let there be light.” The Father created, the Spirit hovered over the waters, and somehow God said something, communicated something, which links to what we're going to read in a moment from John's Gospel, about Jesus being the word of God. And we see the same thing in Mark's gospel at the baptism of Jesus -

**Mark 1:10-11** - *“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

Here is the Trinity in that one place on the River Jordan all those years ago. For me the starting point really is the beginning of John's Gospel, because I love John's gospel. Especially the first few verses. Many people have struggled with the idea what on earth does this mean when we talk about “in the beginning was the Word.” But the word is God's expression, his communication with us and particularly in the flesh incarnate through Jesus.

**John 1:1-2** – *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”*

I mean, John was writing this between 60 and 90 AD. And he got the idea that Jesus was God. He was with God in the beginning.

**John 1:3** – *“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made...”.*

**John 1:14** – *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

And later on in John's gospel he talks about the work of the Spirit. To paraphrase John 14:25-26: “The Spirit will come when I leave you, I will ask the Father to send another advocate (or ‘comforter’), and he will be with you forever. and when the advocate comes, he will teach you and remind you of everything that I've said, and he will testify about me.”

And in John 10:30, he says it very, very clearly....

**John 10:30** – *“I and the Father are one.”*

I've brought some pictures (for simple minds like mine). I find these helpful. The one top left is just a hexagon in which the three parts of the Godhead are named, Father, Son, and Spirit. God is all of those things. But the Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father. Simple, isn't it?

There's an analogy from St. Patrick, the idea of a cloverleaf made of three parts, but equally making up the whole.

There's also different ways in which water is to be found. H<sub>2</sub>O is found as steam, as a liquid, and ice. All the same thing, but in different forms.

And there's also the family - Mum, Dad, Child. A united family, but three different people.

C.S. Lewis says this: "people seem not to notice that the word 'God is love' has no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Christians believe that the living dynamic activity of love has been going on in God forever, and has created everything else. God is a dynamic, pulsating activity. A life almost, like a kind of dance.

Three persons loving contact with one another, moving around, submitting to one another, in harmony with each other. I don't know if you find that useful. Putting it simply, we're not talking about three separate gods who like each other, which is tritheism (as opposed to monotheism, or duo-theism). And it's not uni-personalism, i.e. one God expressed in three different ways (which is, I think, commonly held). But it's one God in three persons, who know one another and love one another from eternity to eternity. Eternally existent, not more fundamentally one than three, and not fundamentally more three than one.

Now this has got some practical implications for us. The practical implication is this. Why do we delight in our relationships? Why do we delight in being friends and family? Where does love of our family and friends come from? Why are we prepared to sacrifice time and money to be with people, to invite them to our parties?

Later today, Diane and I are entertaining 26 family members to our brother-in-law's 70th birthday party. Why? Because, actually, relationships are the most important thing in the world. And where does that come from? It comes from this, what we're talking about today. That if the Godhead is three people, three persons, delighting in each other in that kind of way, we are kind of reflections of that, in the way that we have been created.

If we find all that difficult to grasp, and I wouldn't blame you if you do, we remember these really important things that were emphasized last week. It's already been mentioned this morning in our service.

- 1) That our God is good. That his love endures forever. That his love is at the heart of everything in this world and that his intention for us and for the world is just to bless us.
  
- 2) There's nothing that is impossible for God.

Remember that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is now working in us (as Paul says). And he also says he is able to do far more than all we can imagine, or think by the power that's at work in us.