

# The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is mystical not mathematical.

Sermon by Nigel Cooper at the Chapel at Churchill College

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Readings: Genesis 18:1-8; John 14:8-11, 15-17, 25-26

Certain things mark one for life. My patristics tutor, Fr Meredith SJ, wrote of me, “Cooper shows more clarity than perception.” My attempts to provide a systematic account of key points in Christian Theology in recent sermons, you may agree, show how my perception has advanced – but at the expense of clarity! I make this third attempt this evening in tackling the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, Christianity’s particularly distinctive idea.

The first Christians were Jews. They, therefore, had an absolute commitment to the oneness of God. As Jews, they also knew that God interacted with them in national history and in personal life. There had been various ways in Judaism to talk about those experiences of God, while protecting God’s utter transcendence. So, amongst others, there was language of the Spirit of God, the personification of God’s Wisdom and God’s Word, the religious role of the king, and of Messengers (usually translated as Angels). The three visitors in the reading from the Hebrew Bible this evening are another example. That they are three is seen as a prefiguring of the Trinity as wonderfully portrayed in the icon by Rublev – I have a poor copy if you wish to see this afterwards, when I can explain some of its symbolism. – These manners of talking proved a fruitful resource for Christianity in its own language for God.

The first Christians’ experience of Jesus, both before his death and, supremely, their encounters with the risen Christ, led them to trust, thereby, that God had encountered them in Jesus. This was expressed in several ways in the New Testament. We have just heard the Johannine Jesus say, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” The Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, use ‘Son of God’, with its connotation of full, delegated authority, as good as the actual presence of the Father of the Son himself. St. Paul takes the Jewish credo, the Shema Yisrael, “The Lord our God is one Lord.”<sup>1</sup> He then splits it in two, “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”<sup>2</sup> He unites, thereby, both Christ and the Father into his monotheistic Jewish faith.

The first Christians also received a renewal of the Spirit of God. There was a revival of prophecy, there were healings and tongues, they felt an astounding depth of closeness in their fellowship. These were in continuity with their experience of the earthly Jesus and the dynamic activity of

<sup>1</sup> Deut 6:4

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 8:6

the Spirit working through him then – and which continued into their post-resurrection experiences. This meant that they could call the Spirit of God also the Spirit of Jesus. Again, this was expressed in different ways, such as in our Johannine passage, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name.”

It was just natural that these experiences also found their expression in worship, such as the Pauline, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.”<sup>3</sup> The supreme example is in the instructions for the sacrament of baptism, “Baptise people everywhere in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> – note, ‘in the name’ is singular. Despite the three person there is just a single name for the one God.

The first generation of Christians died, and with them the first-hand experiences of Jesus and the Spirit of Pentecost. The Early Church was then making its way in the Hellenistic culture of the Gentile world. It, frankly, struggled to express the insights of the first Christians in the new thoughtforms of the Greek-speaking world with its philosophical traditions. Was the Son fully God or just a delegate? If God, what did he share with the Father and what made him distinct? Perhaps the Son and the Spirit were no more than facets of the one God seen from different points of view? And how did the Holy Spirit fit into all this? Was he just an afterthought?

Out of these debates came the formula of the Holy Trinity: Three Persons, One God. We can think of it as a rule for talking about God. As the Athanasian Creed puts it, we should “neither confound the persons nor divide the substance.” Of course, such a nicety of doctrine is rather easily caricatured and ridiculed by Christianity’s critics. And many Christians can get entangled in wondering how three can be one and one three. Those who preach can resort to analogies such as ice-water-steam. In my judgement, these attempted explanations are desperately unhelpful. They are both poor (and unbelievable) comparisons, and they distract congregations from the insights the doctrine provides us, insights that prompt worship. How God can be three and one at the same time is best left to God to sort out. The proper work of Christians is to attend to our experiences of both the threesomeness of God and of God’s unitary being – just like, in fact, the first Christians.

And so, I come to offer two slogans that you may find helpful, either in your own exploration of God or in grasping something of what the Trinity can mean to Christians. One slogan concerns what is termed the ‘economic Trinity’, so called from the original meaning of economics as the ordering of a household. The other slogan concerns the ‘essential Trinity’, the way the Trinity exists within itself, its essence.

A) The Economic Trinity. This concerns God’s work in, for example, creation and redemption. My focus is on revelation: how God communicates Godself to his creation. And my three-fold slogan for the Father, Son and Spirit is the Unimaginable, the Image and the Imagination.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 13:13

<sup>4</sup> Mt 28:18f

The Unimaginable: It is widely recognised that, if there is a god, much of the nature of god will be greatly beyond human understanding. “To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?”<sup>5</sup> God is the ultimate, transcendent being about whom all human analogical language fails. This is the realm of the *via negativa*, the way of negation. The only things we can say about God are what God is not. Except, there is ...

The Image: God is not content to rest in glorious isolation from his creation but desires to communicate with it. The auditory analogue is speaking his Word, hence Jesus as Logos. The visual is an image and, for us humans, the ideal would be another human. One we can make sense of. “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”<sup>6</sup> Our knowledge of one another does not rest in merely seeing and hearing each other. All our worthwhile encounters involve something deeper, a mysterious level of sympathetic understanding. And so there is thirdly ...

The Imagination: That capacity to understand and relate to the other person; in this case, to the divine Image. God is reaching out to our deepest interiority, communicating Godself and enabling us to receive this communication, heart-to-heart as it were. “We have received ... the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.”<sup>7</sup> The three Persons, the Unimaginable, the Image and the Imagination, operate together to reveal the single nature of the one God.

B) Turning now to the Essential Trinity, of course the three Persons do not relate to each other in this way. The Father is not unimaginable to the Spirit! “For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ... no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God.”<sup>8</sup>

The fundamental Christian claim is that the essential nature of God is love<sup>9</sup>, and so I offer this threefold slogan: The Lover, the Beloved and the Reflector of Love. Love is a relational concept. From a human perspective, if God is love, God much have loving relationships within Godself. And this we find in Scripture.

Predominately, there is the repeated refrain that Jesus is the Father’s Beloved Son. There is also the reciprocity. The Johannine Jesus says, “I love the Father and do exactly as he commands.”<sup>10</sup> While earlier he says, “The Father loves me because I lay down my life, so that I receive it back again.”<sup>11</sup>

The Holy Spirit is not some mere bystander or wallflower like the proverb, “Two’s company; three’s a crowd.” No, St Paul describes him as the purveyor of love.<sup>12</sup> A threesome tests love,

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<sup>5</sup> Isa 40:18

<sup>6</sup> Jn 1:18

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor 2:12

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor 2:10, 11

<sup>9</sup> 1 Jn 4:8

<sup>10</sup> Jn 14:31

<sup>11</sup> Jn 10:17

<sup>12</sup> Rom 5:5

challenging incestuousness and embracing difference. It is a triangulation without the excluded middle of a binary dualism. We might imagine a conversation in which the Spirit says, “Do you realise how much I love both of you for loving each other?” “Yes, we do, and we love you for it,” is the joint reply.

It is a common conviction of Christian theology, preserving God’s complete freedom of action, that God does not create the world out of necessity or compulsion, for example, to have something to love. This freedom is preserved in this understanding of the Trinity of love. The creation arises out of a free, overflowing of love. We could liken this to two human scenarios.

A single person has a necessity to love. They may seek out a partner to love, and they both may seek to have children to make the reflective threesome. This is akin to the love within the Trinity.

But then, this ‘normal family’ of parents and children may, out of an overflowing of love and not out of psychological compulsion, choose to adopt another child, say a refugee. This is akin to the love of the Trinity that creates the world and adopts humans as sisters and brothers of Christ.

C) This has rather led us back to the Economic Trinity and reminds me how much I have to be thankful for in the love of God. But the Nicene Creed reminds us of a further step, beyond thanksgiving, to worship. “[The Holy Spirit] with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and glorified.” We might call this the doxological Trinity, following Jurgen Moltmann<sup>13</sup>. This is not sycophancy or a placatory response to a demanding deity for obeisance.

No, it is a journey up the ladder of love, which Moltmann describes. A ladder in which we move from attending to the gifts of our lover to the open hand from which they come, and from the hand to the face of love turned towards us, and in the face we forget what we have received and just marvel at the sight of love. Spiritually, this wonder grows into contemplation of the glory of God, the glorification of love itself.

And so, my sermon ends with the ancient doxology to the Holy Trinity, one that dates from the time of the creeds. We have already sung it often this evening:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation (1992) SCM Press