

**‘For everything a season’:
Theology through the church year**
Session 11: Trinity Sunday
Three impossible things before lunch



The Trinity suddenly filled my heart with the greatest joy ...

For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our maker and protector, the Trinity is our dear friend for ever ...for it seems to me that where Jesus is spoken of, the Holy Trinity is to be understood.

(Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 14th Century)

1. Trinity Sunday

The Sunday after Pentecost is observed in the Western Church as the Feast of the Holy and Undivided Trinity ('Trinity Sunday'). A special mass text honouring the Holy Trinity was written at the time of the Arian controversy¹ (4th Century), and over time there were various customs observing a special feast in honour of the Trinity (in France, Germany, England, the Netherlands, and among the Benedictine and Cistercian orders). Pope Alexander II (1073) declared that every day of the liturgical year was devoted to the Sacred Trinity, but the various observations of the feast on different Sundays led Pope John XII (1334) to declare an official observation of the feast on the Sunday after Pentecost. The *Sarum* rite numbered the Sundays after Trinity, rather than after Pentecost, and the C of E continued this numbering in the *Book of Common Prayer* and revived it in *Common Worship*.

2. The Trinity: founding statements

The classical statement of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one substance and three persons. 'Substance' expresses the common foundational unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 'Person' expresses the distinct yet related roles that the one God plays in the drama of salvation: *creation, redemption, sanctification*. Formulations of the Trinity must avoid one of two extremes: *modalism*, which suggests that these three roles are different functions of the one God, but not overlapping in any way; *tritheism*, which suggests that the three 'persons' of the Trinity are three equal, independent beings. The Greek term *perichoresis* (the origin of the word 'choreography') has been used to express the 'community of being' of the three persons of the Trinity: each is distinct yet essentially related, in perfect communion, a 'circle dance of love' (Rohr, p. 27). 'Circling around' is also an apt way to express our inability to fully grasp the mystery of the Trinity.

¹ Arius was a Christian priest in Alexandria, whose views on the nature of Christ were deemed heretical at the First Council of Nicaea in AD325. Arius argued that Christ was a created being, 'a perfect creature', being of a similar but not identical substance to God the Father.

3. The Trinity and Worship

The Trinity is a central aspect of Christian worship and liturgy, featuring in baptism, blessing, doxology ('Glory be to the Father ...'), the Grace, the Creeds, the shape of Eucharistic Prayers, and countless other ways. Arguably, our worship and liturgy can make an otherwise abstract and difficult doctrine easier to understand. Here are three ways in which the doctrine of the Trinity relates to our worship:

3.1 The Trinity as mystery

The nature of God as Trinity has long been described as mystery: something beyond our human understanding. On the one hand, this reflects something of the inability of human language to describe the nature of God. On the other hand, this doesn't mean that intellectual grappling with 'mysteries' is fruitless or damaging to faith. 'Mystery isn't something that you cannot understand; it is something that you can endlessly understand ... there is no point at which you can say, 'I've got it!' (Rohr, p. 27). In the words of St Augustine, *si comprehendis, non est Deus* (if you can get your head around it, it isn't God). Liturgy has the capacity to contain ambiguity and mystery such that, through our worship, we can endlessly *experience* the mystery of the Trinity.

3.2 The social Trinity

Jurgen Moltmann, in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (1980), argues that 'the Trinity is our social program'. The Trinity is 'the exemplar of true human community, first in the church and also in society'. God's nature is a mutually loving, interacting and sustaining community, and the model for and source of every relationship—ecclesial, personal, social, political. This understanding of the Trinity clearly has implications for the way we think about our worship and our church community.

3.3 The Trinity and hospitality

The classic Rublev icon, *The Hospitality of Abraham*, depicts the three persons of the Trinity eating and drinking, sharing hospitality, and seemingly inviting the viewer to share at the divine table. 'All creation is invited in, and this is the liberation God intended from the very beginning' (Rohr, p. 31). How seriously do we take this invitation, both to ourselves and to others? How 'hospitable' is our worship?

Next talk: Sunday 15th July: Green is for growth – 'ordinary' time

References:

McGrath, A. *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2007)

Rohr, R. *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (SPCK 2016)