

Trinity Sunday 2021

Isa 6 1-8

Psalms 29

Rom 8 12-17

John 3 1-17

I am sure you have all had experience of saying "I knew that, but I didn't realise it" in response to some piece of information or other.

Trinity is one those fundamental doctrines of the Church to which people often have that kind of response: "I knew that, but I didn't know I knew that". What they knew but did not realise it is that Trinity is not strictly biblical.

The word "Trinity" does not occur in scripture at all. However, evidence for three persons of Trinity clearly does.

The reading from John has Jesus talking about being born of "water and the Spirit", so that is the third person of the Trinity. Then he talks about: "God who gave his only Son...". So, that is the Father, the first person of Trinity, and the Son, Jesus, the second person. The reading from Paul's letter to Romans also refers to all 3 persons: The Spirit, "Abba Father" and Christ.

Matthew's Gospel has Jesus making it even more explicit (28: 19): "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

If it is a belief that is there but not there, how does it come to be such a fundamental to our faith, which we recite most Sundays in the Nicene creed?

The term 'Trinity' comes from Latin 'trinitas' meaning 3. The word was first used by the theologian Tertullian of Carthage, the second century thinker who also coined the phrase "person". The doctrine of the Trinity is commonly expressed as: "One God, three Persons". Tertullian explained that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were "one in essence - not one in Person."

Our faith is monotheistic, we believe in one unified God not a plethora of 'gods' and we share monotheism with Muslims and Jews; but they do not share belief in Trinity.

The Trinity is a foundational doctrine that all in the family of very 'broad church' share: Orthodox, RC, Protestant, Reform, Pentecostal, Adventists, Charismatic: all of us. However, there are also groups that fall under umbrella of Christianity that do not believe in Trinity [JWs, Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Unitarians]

The doctrine of the Trinity took centuries to develop, but its roots are visible from the first century. As I pointed out, foundations of the concept can be seen in the NT, especially in the Gospel of John, one of the latest and most theologically developed of the NT books.

Almost two centuries after Tertullian, in 325 AD, the Council of Nicea led by Bishop Athanasius set out to officially define the relationship of the Son to the Father, in response to the controversial teachings of Arius. The council established the doctrine of the Trinity as orthodoxy and condemned Arius' teaching that Christ was not actually God, but the first creation of God. Arianism was finally condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

The creed adopted by the council which we still use to reaffirm our faith described Christ as "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father."

Nicea did not end the controversy, however. Debate over how the creed (especially the phrase "one substance") ought to be interpreted continued to rage for decades. One group advocated the doctrine that Christ was a "similar substance" (*homoiousios*) as the Father. But for the most part, the issue of the Trinity was settled at Nicea and, by the fifth century, was no longer a focus of serious controversy.

Saint Augustine, one of the greatest thinkers of the early church, described the Trinity as comparable to the three parts of an individual human being: mind, spirit, and will. They are three distinct aspects, yet they are inseparable and together constitute one unified human being.

At an institutional level, there is still controversy in the church today, but about different things, about practice perhaps, which is based on belief: SSM, the role and ministry of women and death with dignity. However, at a personal level, many people struggle with different elements of "doctrine". I think we need to grant ourselves, and one another, the right to be uncertain, and to be honest about it.



Before there was universal literacy or access to the printed word, the church had another striking way to teach disseminate faith through images in stained glass windows, religious paintings, and icons. Iconography has been called the "theology of colour". This is the very well-known icon said to be of Trinity by 15thC Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev, now housed in Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow may be some been lucky enough to see it. Regarded as Rublev's best work though his authorship is questioned, and scientists can only posit theories about its creation and history.

Icon depicts the three mysterious travellers or angels who visited Abraham and Sarah at the oak of Mamre (Genesis 18: 1-15). Full of symbolism rich in language of icons. The Church said to have specifically chosen this icon

because it most fully expresses the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: the three angels are depicted in equal dignity, symbolising the *trinity and equality* of all three Persons.

The persons of the Holy Trinity are shown in the order in which they are confessed in the Nicene Creed. The first angel on left is the first person of the Trinity - God the Father; the second, middle angel is God the Son; the third angel is God the Holy Spirit. All three angels are blessing the chalice, which holds a sacrificed calf, prepared for eating, signifying the Saviour's death on the cross, the sacrament of the Eucharist. All three angels hold a staff which is a symbol of their divine power.

Colours in iconography symbolic, so first angel, on left, wears a blue undergarment to symbolise his divine celestial nature, and a light purple outer garment signifying to his unfathomable nature and royal dignity. Behind him and above his head is a house, the abode of Abraham, with a sacrificial altar in front. The house symbolises God's master plan for creation, while the fact that the house towers above him shows him to be the head (or Father) of this creation.

In his entire appearance he has fatherly authority - his head is not bowed, and he is looking at the other two angels. His whole demeanour - the expression on his face, the placement of his hands, the way he is sitting - all speak of his fatherly dignity.

Notice that the other two angels have their heads inclined and eyes turned toward the first angel, attention focused on him.

The second angel is placed in the middle of the icon, symbolic of the position held by the second Person in the Trinity. Above his head are the branches of an oak tree, a reminder of the tree of life that was standing in Eden, and of the cross.

The second angel presented in vestments in which the Saviour is usually depicted: dark crimson undergarment symbolises the incarnation; blue outer robe signifies the divinity of this angel.

The Holy Spirit's light blue undergarment and smoky-green outer garment represent heaven and earth, and signify The Spirit's life-giving force, which animates everything that exists. An ancient hymn of the church says, "By the Holy Spirit every soul lives and is elevated in purity" and the mountain above third angel represents this elevation in purity.

Rublev's icon is not only an outstanding example of iconography, but also a work of symbolism that once instructed the faithful and can still give us window onto the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

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