

Knowledge and love of the triune God

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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*Exodus 34.1-8; Song of the Three Young Men 29-34; 2 Corinthians 13.11-13;
Matthew 28.16-20*

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most notoriously difficult subjects to understand and preach about. You will have to excuse me while I again tell my favourite joke about the Trinity.

Jesus said, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

And his disciples answered, "Some say you are John the Baptist returned from the dead; others say Elijah, or another of the old prophets."

Jesus said, "But whom do *you* say that I am?"

And they answered, "Thou art the Logos, existing in the Father as His rationality and then, by an act of His will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to his creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple."

And Jesus said, "What?"

The word Trinity is not anywhere in the Bible. It's not there because the formal doctrine of the Trinity was developed around 200 - 300 years after those early writings and events. It may seem like a made up idea with no foundation in scripture or reality, but the notion of God as one and three is implied throughout the Bible and, I would contend, in the nature of reality itself.

We struggle with the idea of the Trinity because on a rational level it makes no sense. How can someone say that there is only one God but also three? There is a story told of St Augustine of Hippo, the great philosopher and theologian, who wanted so much to understand the doctrine of the Trinity and to be able to explain it logically.

One day as he was walking along the seashore and reflecting on this, he suddenly saw a little child all alone on the shore. The child made a hole in the sand, ran to the sea with a little cup, filled her cup, came and poured it into the hole she had made in the sand. Back and forth she went to the sea, filled her cup and came and poured it into the hole. Augustine went up to her and said, "Little child, what are doing?" and she replied, "I am trying to empty the sea into this hole." "How do you think," Augustine asked her, "that you can empty this immense sea into this tiny hole and with this tiny cup?" To which she replied, "Well, how do you think that with your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?" And with that the child disappeared.

And that of course is the problem in a nutshell. God is ultimately a mystery and our human words are only every pale and inaccurate approximations of this reality. This truth led the anonymous writer of that famous medieval classic, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, to direct his or her readers to give up trying to understand God through knowledge and intellect. Instead, the only way to know God was through love and loving God. In fact you can now close your eyes and ears and spend the next ten minutes praising and loving God and you will get more out

this sermon than if you paid careful attention to what I am saying. Indeed, if you remember just one thing from this sermon, remember this message about knowing God by loving God.

But for those that have decided to keep listening through politeness, curiosity or just maybe because I might say something that the Spirit can use in your life, I want to give you some background to the doctrine of the Trinity and why this notion of God is so profoundly important.

It all comes down to worldviews—or a better name is perhaps cosmology. This is the way we understand our place in the universe and the relationship to things around us. Our worldview is not only an idea; it will inform all our thinking and actions. To give you a couple of examples: a dominant worldview in our culture is materialism, which says that there is nothing in the universe but matter and that we basically originated by chance through the physical processes of evolution.

A contrasting worldview would be traditional Aboriginal culture that has quite a different perspective. They believe their beginnings were formed in ‘the dreaming’ when ancestral beings created the physical landscape which then embodied their spirit and power. People are part of the land and the land part of the people. Of course most people in our culture have a meld of worldviews, a real eclectic mix and match.

Back when the doctrine of the Trinity was developed, the dominant worldview was paganism with a smattering of platonic philosophy and Hebrew theology thrown in. This cosmology viewed time as circular where behind the tales of heroes and the rise and fall of city empires lay a vast mythic prehistory. There was no sense of the future as a realm of unrealized possibilities. It’s almost impossible for us to get sense of this circular time, to feel it in our bones, as the ancients would have.

The natural world was also part of a great hierarchy of powers with the most powerful God at the top and then a cascading world of elemental spirits, genii, daemons, gods and goddesses and occult powers all of which had to be invoked, supplicated and appeased. The most powerful god at the top did not come into contact with lesser mortals or matter. This god was fixed at the pinnacle, limited and bound by his own transcendence. It was an extremely hierarchical system and very determined.

One of its most telling features was the presence of the Fates: these were three goddesses who spent their time weaving a rug where all the affairs of men and gods appear. There is nothing that can be done to alter this rug; even the gods were powerless to do so. In the end this worldview is very complex and beautiful, but it is a very bleak system. David Bentley Hart, an orthodox theologian, an expert on the era, says it was imbued with deep sadness.

When we begin to explore this worldview we can then start to see what an amazing feat the understanding of the Trinity was and how it presents a completely different worldview, one that we still have trouble grasping. It is hard because the human default position is to fall into categories, hierarchy and levels of status.

Some of the early writers, way back when the doctrine was being formulated, said that it was impossible for the great God to become human and that Jesus was simply a lesser divine being, an intermediary if you like. Others said that Jesus was only a man who was adopted by God and given God’s spirit. We might think these ideas were very small matters but they and others like them completely destabilized the ancient world such that the emperor Constantine called a council, the Council of Nicaea, to get the issue sorted out. Theologians, bishops and rulers gathered to grapple with the debate of the age and out of this meeting we have the Nicene Creed, which we say every Sunday.

Instead of proposing a hierarchical world made up of an inaccessible god and numerous other capricious spiritual powers and a human existence that was bound by fate, the doctrine of the Trinity taught that God was a relationship of love between three distinct persons, co-equal, co-eternal, co-existing. It was creative lover, beloved and love, who became incarnate, became fully human, to show humanity and creation the way to fullness of life, a better future than the one they believed they were bound in. It was a view that taught that God is creator ... Father/mother. “Full of compassion and pity, who shows great love and faithfulness,” as Exodus puts it. God is, as John has it, Word, made flesh, brother, friend and saviour and God is Spirit, sustainer and giver of life. Salvation was nothing less than a real and living union between God and his creatures. God became us, that we might be one with God.

For the doctrine of the Trinity is not only a complete worldview. It actually mirrors the nature of reality at its most fundamental level. Or another way to say it is that Reality itself is a reflection of the union and diversity of God. Creation itself is like the creator—one unity in diversity. In fact this is the way in *everything* works. Everything is interconnected from the blood cell in your body to the largest star, from the creature at the bottom of the ocean to the subatomic particle in space. And one act of inhumanity pierces the heart of God.

Everything is both one and many. How extraordinary that the idea of the Trinity is so fundamentally related to the nature of existence itself?

When Paul writes that blessing at the end of 2 Corinthians, the blessing we often say after meetings and services, he is making a statement about the way the world, creation actually is: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the three in one creative, redeeming, sustaining energy of the whole universe. God is a gift of Godself, freely given, freely available for all. This is the God who created you, who loves you and all creation—the God who knows you as intimately as you know yourself, who came in flesh to be brother, friend, teacher and saviour, who sustains your life, who holds us together in fellowship, who directs, guides and inspires, who is the ground of your being and your very breath.

Let us celebrate and give thanks for our God, *the* God. Let us worship in awe and gratitude. Let us know we are one with God, one with each other and one with the living universe. May we live our lives in the knowledge and love of the triune God.