

# Holy, Holy, Holy

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on Trinity Sunday, 4 July 2023

The readings were: Isaiah 40:12-17, 27-end; 2 Corinthians 13:11-14; Matthew 28:16-20



Trinity in terms of his own roles in life as a son, a husband and a father: three different roles and yet the same person! Well, this seemed ingenious but unfortunately doesn't help us understand the Trinity – because the *three roles* of son, husband and father are neither inseparable nor concurrent nor universal in application, as are the three persons of the Trinity. It's possible for a man to be a son without ever being a husband or a father; it's possible for him to be a husband without being a father, or a father without being a husband. And, of course, he can't be *all of these things to everybody all of the time*.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the midpoint in the Christian year that began at Advent, the turning point in our calendar, a week after Pentecost when the promised gift of the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, transforming them into apostles. The past six months have been mainly about Jesus: his birth, life, death, Resurrection and Ascension and last week we focussed on the coming of the Holy Spirit. Today is the day when we're invited to bring all of that together and look at our Christian faith as a single entity, a single *doctrine* – not a particularly easy task. Preachers today will be struggling to define the Trinity in ways that are orthodox, but also, alas, there will be many of the not quite orthodox: ingenious but slightly erroneous attempts to explain this difficult concept of the Holy Trinity.

It's often the case that just when you think you've found a good way of explaining the Trinity, you discover that you're caught up in some ancient heresy. I once heard an engaging preacher try to illustrate the

Our three-personed God should not be seen as one person wearing three different hats, or operating in three separate *modes*, but as a unity of *three persons who have co-existed* from the very beginning. So what might be a more helpful image? One of the best I've come across is a musical one. Music consists of individual and quite distinct notes, but I'm sure you'll agree that it's much richer when many notes are played together at the same time. St Ignatius is said to have *heard* the Trinity as music, as three notes played together in harmony. The full beauty of God's music filling the universe is experienced when the different notes are played simultaneously. Thus Father, Son and Holy Spirit have co-existed in a divine harmony from the beginning, inseparable in the creation, the redeeming and sustaining of the world.

There's something here about the infinite beauty and perfection of God. Another helpful image of the Trinity I've come across is that of *light*: think of the light





produced by a candle, where the three elements of wax, wick and flame come together simultaneously to create light. No one part can provide light without the presence of the other two; *all three parts need to combine* for the whole to realise its purpose of bringing light into darkness.

At one time, my own problem with the Trinity wasn't that I couldn't understand the different persons individually, for these seemed clear enough: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. My problem was a numerological one: why God should consist of *three* persons at all. Why three? Why not *two*, or *four*, or *seven*, which is also a special number, after all? I found it difficult to accept that the number three, which seemed to me quite arbitrary, should embrace the whole nature and identity of God. Was there some primeval, natural or logical reason for the number three that I was missing? It couldn't surely just be those words "Holy, holy, holy" that come from the sixth chapter of the prophet Isaiah (6:3). I was interested to discover that Bishop Hugh Montefiore, a former Vicar of the church I was a member of in Cambridge, had the same problem as I had. In his book, *Credible Christianity*, he writes: "Why three, we may ask? Why not two, or even four? Of course," he continues, "it may be said in reply that that is how God is, and we know that God is thus because he has revealed it. But the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity can hardly be called a revealed doctrine, except on the authority of the Church Councils that formulated it."<sup>1</sup>

So, "That is how God is." I suggested that beauty, perfection and harmony are characteristics of our three-personed

God. We say that God is *love*, and this is another image that demands threefold participation: for divine love, like all loves, cannot exist without the threefold interaction of the one who loves, the one who is loved and the love itself that binds them together. And through the beloved Son, Jesus Christ, in his relationship with God the Father, we too are drawn into that fellowship of love with God and with one another.

I've come to see that our three-personed God contains everything our human nature requires in one true God who is creator, redeemer and sustainer. The created world of which we are a part is a place of poignant beauty: poignant because it contains pain and imperfection, loss and unfulfilled longing. But our faith teaches us that we're moving onwards towards perfection, the *perfect* creation that exists in the mind of God the Father, and we believe we can do this only through the gift of Jesus, the Son. It was in the person of Jesus that God entered into *our* imperfection and took it upon himself, so that we know that there's nothing in our lives or our humanity that is alien to the Creator. We're fallen creatures, but we know we are deeply loved: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life," as we read in John's Gospel (3:16). Our ultimate destiny is union with God in glory and divine perfection. We need to be redeemed, forgiven and reconciled to our creator and to one another; and in the absence of the physical Jesus we need to be sustained and blessed in our daily struggle by that third person of the Trinity, God's Holy Spirit – dwelling within us, among us, and in our world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Montefiore, *Credible Christianity*, 122





Let's end with another metaphor. Imagine a play in which the same person is the author, the principal actor and the director. The person who writes the script plays the leading role and also directs all the other actors, making sure the meaning of the play is developed clearly. There's no real division of labour among author, principal actor and director, but a unified endeavour with a single objective. The author knows how the leading actor and the director will respond to the script; the director is responsible for how the drama is worked out on the stage, with the cooperation of all the other members of the cast as well as the main actor. The principal actor brings the plot to life and also allows himself to be guided by the director in his interactions with the whole company. In the performance of the play, a single unity, the author will be invisible and so will the director; only the leading actor will be visible, will incarnate the action to which all three have contributed. You miss the point if you just see one person wearing three different hats, performing different roles at different times, because that misses the unity and integrity of the whole project.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the three persons of God. In the unity of our lives, these three persons are ever present, active and vigilant. This is "the mystery of the most Holy Trinity ... the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life."<sup>2</sup> Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church

---

Our picture is of the floral arrangement at Rosyth Methodist Church created for Trinity Sunday by Val Leslie.