

## Trinity Sunday 2025

*May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Hmmm. Now *there's* an issue. I vividly recall visiting the house of a friend in my youth group when I was a teenager. Her mum was one of the Greenham Common protestors, and she was a thinker. On the notice board in the house was an article from a feminist magazine with the headline "TWO MEN AND AN IT." *Boom!* I got the point immediately . . . and felt the force of it. Your God is a bloke—just a way of divinizing men and justifying a patriarchal order in society. That is a very legitimate concern. Oh boy! I can see why they say that Trinity Sunday is the preacher's graveyard.

OK then. Once more into the breach! Let's grasp the nettle and say a few provisional—only provisional—things that may at least start to address that important objection.

In Christian thought there is a fundamental *distinction* to be made between the Creator and the creature. It's true that God is profoundly *present* in all created things, but the God who saturates and permeates creation is the God who is *radically Other*. God is not simply a hyper-inflated version of a human being—with lots of features like us, just *way* bigger. That's the way we think of God when we're children, but as we mature into the faith we hopefully come to see that God is a deep and profound mystery that can't be captured by any of the words and categories we apply to creation. God is not just another item in the world in addition to all the others. It's not that we could count up the stuff in the cosmos: apples, cars, mountains, stars, birds, wine gums, and then need to add God onto the list if it was to be complete. God is the Creator and is not to be confused with creatures. God is not a *thing* in the world—God is what enables there to be a world at all.

Of course, this makes speaking about God more than a little challenging. That is a polite English way of saying *freaking difficult*. It's easy to see why. Our

words are forged to speak of the world we inhabit and to help us to navigate it. When we try to use them to speak of that which transcends the world, the Source of our very being, our vocabulary flails around wildly trying to find some purchase. When we speak of God our poor words are well outside their comfort zone, and they *will* fail us. A truth the church has always insisted on is that God can't be encapsulated and contained by language. There's truth in the words of the holy sage Ronan Keating: "*You say it best when you say nothing at all.*"

Yet speak we must. So we speak, but with great *caution*; always knowing that our words fall short. One theologian speaks of our language about God being like a finger pointing at the moon. There's a real relationship between the finger and the moon; the finger is able to point us in the right direction, but we must never think that the finger *is* the moon, that there is no distinction to make between *our words about God* (the finger) and *the reality of God* (the moon). If we mistake our words for God with God we create an idol. If our words are true then they truly point us towards God, but we can never know exactly what we're talking about. So if you find God confusing—good. The time to worry is when you don't.

It can be helpful in this regard to consider how our God-speak is full of tensions and paradox. For example: What is the Holy Spirit? A wind? A river? Rain? Fire? A dove? *All* of them, and *none* of them, and *more*. And is the Spirit "poured out" *upon* us from above or does it well up from *within* like a spring of living water? According to Scripture, *both*—and *neither*, and *more*. The infinite excess of God demands a multiplicity of metaphors and a welcome embrace of paradox. Thinking about God should blow-your-mind and captivate your heart.

*How great a being, Lord, is thine,  
which doth all beings keep!  
Thy knowledge is the only line  
to sound so vast a deep.*

*Thou art a sea without a shore,  
a sun without a sphere;  
thy time is now and evermore,  
thy place is everywhere.*

Talking about God requires poets as much as philosophers.

So let's come to talking about God as Father, Son, and Spirit. This language, as all language for God, is metaphor and analogy. It's drawn from the everyday world of human experience and is used as a finger to point at the moon, the God who transcends the world. Yes, even *Spirit* is a metaphor. The Hebrew and Greek words for *spirit* mean wind or breath—it's the movement of air we experience, which we can't see save for its effects, it's the very life-breath in our lungs. This air becomes a symbol with which we try to think and speak of God—as Spirit.

It's the same with talk of Father and Son. And the classical theologians of the church have not only known this but have *insisted* on it. They've been adamant talk of God as Father or Son is *not to be taken literally*. God is not Father in the same way that human fathers are fathers; nor Son in the way human sons are sons. Think about it: man and woman, male and female, these are human categories seeking to map the world. God is not a bloke. God is not male. God's not even masculine, whatever we think that means. This may seem trivial but it's actually a very important point for what the early Christians have wanted to say about the Trinity. When we declare the faith of the church in the creed, we say that Jesus is the Son "begotten" of the Father. That language made some people in the early church started asking: "Does that mean that God the Father *created* God the Son? That he begat him like a human father begets a son?" Absolutely *not!* That's why the creed states that the Son was "*eternally* begotten of the Father." This's a way of saying that this divine begetting is *not like human begetting*. The Son has no beginning in time—he is timelessly being

begotten of the Father. To speak of the Father begetting the Son is not to speak about something that happened a long time ago. It is a way of gesturing towards the mystery of their eternal relationship. So talk of Father and Son when used of God is drawing on *aspects* of the relationship of human fathers and sons, as understood in the cultures of ancient Palestine, to give us a glimpse of a reality in God. But at the very same time it is *emphatically not* saying that God is literally a father or a son. Here's the point: one key aspect of the usual meaning of father and son that is stripped away when the words are applied to God is the *male*, procreative aspect. Weird as it may sound, God the Father is not a *male* father.

To help us to see that, notice the way that Scripture speaks of how God gives birth to us (John 3:5); how God breastfeeds us (Isa 49:15); how God comforts his people, like a mother (Isa 66:13). One seventh-century church council (Eleventh Synod of Toledo) even says that the Son was born “from the womb of the Father.” Well, I vividly recall changing nappies, but I am pretty darn sure that if I'd done any of *that* stuff I'd have remembered it! God the Father isn't male.

And God the Son isn't male either. Oh, I know that *Jesus* is a bloke! Of course he is. But the Word that “became flesh,” as John's Gospel puts it, isn't a bloke. The second person of the Trinity isn't a bloke. We see that in our reading from Proverbs. The early church theologians agreed that this passage was about Christ—the one who was with God in the beginning and through whom God made the world. So take a look: it concerns the Wisdom of God, who is pictured as a prophetic woman calling out to people. But she's no ordinary prophetess. She says that she was brought forth from God before anything was created—she is, in other words, God's daughter. (Obviously, this is metaphorical.) And through her God created the cosmos. She is the Wisdom of God. From a New Testament perspective, *she* is the second person of the Trinity;

*she* is the Word of God; *she* is the one who was made human as Jesus. If we wanted to mix our metaphors, we'd say *she* is God the Son. So yes, Jesus of Nazareth is a man, but the God incarnate in Christ is not. Truly, the one God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—is indeed the Mother of us all.

Furthermore, it's important to note that Father, Son, and Spirit is not the *only* naming pattern for the three persons we find in the Bible. If Father, Son, and Spirit are two men and an 'it', then what is God, Wisdom, and Spirit? A 'they', a 'she', and an 'it'? Or God, Word, and Spirit? A 'they', an 'it', and an 'it'? And there are other patterns too. You get the idea.

Now the Father–Son–Spirit pattern is a *very* important one for the church, and the reason for this is because it is the one focused on the incarnation—it's built around the ministry of Jesus and his relationship with God as his Father. We could say that Father–Son–Spirit is the naming pattern for the Trinity that emerges around the coming of the second person of the Trinity as Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> That makes it a distinctively Christian way of speaking about God and not one we can simply drop. Nonetheless, we must (i) use it more *thoughtfully*, better understanding what we *do* and *don't* mean to communicate by such language, and (importantly) (ii) we must *supplement* it with other ways of speaking of God, not least to stop us falling unconsciously into the trap of taking our metaphors literally.

Time has got away with us, but I don't want to leave you with the impression that the Trinity is just some kind of embarrassing problem to solve. Speaking of God as Trinity is the *very shape* of the Christian encounter with (and experience of) God. We cannot tell the story of Scripture, climaxing in the work of Jesus, without speaking of the God who creates the world through

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<sup>1</sup> Father language is not used in Scripture of God's relationship to creation as Creator. It is used of God's relationship to Christ, his elect, and of God's relationship to believers "in Christ." It is *the incarnation* and the function of Father language (rooted in the OT) in Jesus' relationship with God that makes Father–Son language so central for the church. The eternal relationship of persons could equally refer to Father/Mother/Parent and Son/Daughter/Child. God *in Godself* could be spoken of as Parent–Child. God in the incarnation is Father–Son.

God's Wisdom and God's life-giving Breath. The Father who sends his Son, conceived by the Spirit, to live among us as a human. The Son who, filled with the Spirit, reveals the Father to us in life-giving words. The Messiah who reconciles us to God through his death and resurrection and who pours out upon us the Spirit he has received from God. The Spirit of Christ who wells up within us from God. And on and on and on. To talk of the Trinity is first and foremost the *only* way we can tell our gospel-shaped story about God and God's way with the world. This is our story, this is our song. We can sing it no other way.

The Trinity, then, is not a puzzle to solve nor an explanation of God to satisfy our curiosity—God is and ever will be an impenetrable mystery. But we believe that it *is* a *revelation*, albeit veiled in enigma, of the God who is *Love*; an insight that the very Source of the cosmos is *relationship* all the way down, existing in a triune flow of eternal giving and receiving, loving and being loved. To speak of God as Trinity, then, is our fumbling way of declaring that there is no reality deeper than Love. And *this* Triune God of Love stands, facing us today, arms outstretched, inviting us here to come, eat, drink, and share in the very life of God. “O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” Amen.