

# Three makes sense, but one?

*A sermon on the Trinity by Nathan Nettleton, 16 June 2019*

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## Message

The God revealed to us in Jesus and experienced through the Holy Spirit is so dynamic and multi-faceted that we may find it hard to believe that we are always dealing with the one God.

## Sermon

As we come to reflect on the Word tonight, our approach is a bit different from most weeks. Most weeks the cycle of scripture readings that we follow is working through some part of the Bible and gives us the next bit of the story. It suggests that we begin with the Bible readings themselves, and that any themes are to come from the readings.

On special occasions like Christmas and Pascha and Pentecost, there is obviously a theme going on as well, but the Gospel reading at least still gives us a story and the readings are still calling for our primary attention. But the first Sunday after Pentecost each year is different. On this day, the Bible readings are the supporting cast and a theme takes centre stage.

The theme is our understanding of God as Trinity: traditionally expressed as One God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is certainly not the only Sunday you will hear of the Trinity. Our prayers and our preaching assume and refer to the Trinity all year round and are, I would hope, thoroughly trinitarian in structure, in style, and in spirit.

But today, we are asked not just to assume it and refer to it, but to focus on it and explore it. And the reason that the Bible readings take a more secondary place than normal is because the Trinity, strictly speaking, is not really a Biblical doctrine. I'm not suggesting that it is unbiblical, or contrary to scripture. It's not. But there is no passage of scripture that presents or explores the doctrine of the Trinity as its central focus.

There are numerous passages, including the ones we heard tonight, that express something of the idea that God is a Trinity, but it is probably true that none of the biblical writers could have sat down and described the doctrine of the Trinity for you. Not even Paul. Why? Because the doctrine of the Trinity was never fully thought through and described until well after the time of the New Testament. In fact it was not really nailed down until the fourth century.

This is not really as odd as it might sound. For Paul or the others, the Trinity was not a doctrine, but an experience. They experienced God in several different ways, and if you could have outlined the doctrine of the Trinity to them, they'd have probably said, "Oh yes! Of course! That explains it. We've kind of known that for ages, but we just didn't realise it yet." You all know how that happens. Something has been a familiar experience for you for a while, but one day someone offers a theory that makes sense of it and suddenly the lights come on. "Of course! It's obvious now that you say it!"

So when we look at tonight's Bible readings, we can readily see evidence of the early church's experience of the Trinity. In Paul's letter to the Romans (5:1-5), we heard him say "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... (and) God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." And in the gospel reading (John 16: 12-15), Jesus says to the

disciples, “All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that the Spirit of Truth will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

So the ideas of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit were already well and truly present, but no one had yet really grappled with how they fitted together in theory. It was as though there was a potential contradiction in what everyone was thinking and saying, but no one grapples with it until someone points it out and challenges it, and that didn't happen until later.

To the mathematical mind, the contradiction might seem obvious, but it doesn't usually occur to most of us to ask mathematical questions about our understanding of God. Mathematically three does not equal one, and one does not equal three.

Jesus and the apostles were faithful Jews whose understanding of God was clearly monotheistic. That is, they rejected any idea of worshipping multiple gods. Their traditional creed was the “Shema”: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One. You shall worship no other God.” They had all grown up reciting that several times a day. But now they are also talking of worshipping Jesus, the risen messiah, and of being guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And it is not until someone challenges that and says, “but you seem to be talking about three different gods”, that they begin having to try to nut it out as a doctrine.

On the other hand, many of the early Christians, especially in the churches Paul was planting around Europe, were not traditional Jews. They were gentiles who came from pagan backgrounds in the Greek and Roman world. And the ancient Greeks and Romans were not monotheists at all, but polytheists. They had whole pantheons of gods; a god of this and a god of that and a god of the other thing. So for many of them, offering worship to Father, Son and Holy Spirit would have initially just seemed like switching to a smaller pantheon.

They wouldn't have had any problem with someone saying “but you seem to be talking about three different gods”. Rather it would be when someone said, “but there is only one God” that they'd have been scratching their heads. And when you think about it, given that our experiences of God and our images of God are so diverse, it is probably the idea that God is one that is the biggest surprise to us too. Three or more gods wouldn't be so hard to accept. But the idea that we are all talking about the one God is a bit more perplexing.

Now it is not until the fourth century that the head scratching finally needs to be sorted out. Perhaps it came to a head then partly because it was then that the gentile converts from polytheistic backgrounds were starting to outnumber the Jewish Christians. They were starting to have a greater influence on the way the Christian faith was understood.

Anyway, it comes to a head with a bloke called Arius who asks the curly questions and challenges everyone's thinking. It had been pretty much assumed among the followers of Jesus from the resurrection until then that Jesus was divine, that he was in fact God in human form – the complete self-revelation of the God of the universe.

But now Arius began to question this. It wasn't that he didn't like Jesus. He argued that Jesus should be understood as a wonderful human being, but for Arius, God was so far above us humans that the idea of God becoming human was an outrage.

God, by definition, said Arius, is self-contained, complete within himself, and not needing to communicate himself in any way. God is exalted, holy, pure, absolute, glorious, and for Arius the idea of such a God lowering himself to become personally involved with his creatures was demeaning and blasphemous. He reckoned it was a pagan vulgarisation of God. It made God like one of the gods of the Greek pantheon, a sort of superhero who ate and drank and fought and occasionally dropped in for a bit of sex which might result in fathering a human child. Such ideas were a disgusting insult to God, said Arius.

In all the history of the church there has probably never been a more exalted glorious image of God than that portrayed and fought for by Arius.

But enter the team for the defence, championed by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius challenged Arius' position at its central point. Being self-contained, superior and distant is not the essential feature of God he said. Professional distance might be seen as an important value for doctors and social workers, but Athanasius argued that we make a serious mistake if we project the same detached style onto God.

Athanasius argued that the essential defining feature of God was not utter independence, but self-giving; love that gives and gives and gives. And he argued that this self-giving occurs even within God. Between the Father and the Son and the Spirit there is total mutual self-giving. And then this self-giving looks outwards and expresses itself in a totally unprofessional nearness to others, including us.

God gets totally involved with us, loving, cherishing, nurturing, longing, craving our response and our giving in return. God is the Spirit who moves through us with every breath, who whispers into our ear, who prompts us and cajoles us towards god-likeness, expressed in self-giving and love.

Athanasius accused Arius of having a sterile God who sits in isolated splendour, useless and irrelevant and passionless. The God made known in Jesus is dynamic, involved, always busy relating, getting involved, cherishing, shining, revealing, expressing, giving; a God who can know joy and pain, a God who longs for us to return the love we are shown, a God who hurts when we fail to respond and who grieves when we damage ourselves in the process.

Needless to say, Athanasius won the debate and the doctrine of the trinity was spelled out, or to use the language of the moment, it was codified. But it is amazing how many Arians you still meet. There are no shortage of church people around who would approve of the trinity as a doctrine but who still teach an Arian image of God, high, exalted, distant, uninvolved. That's why we continue to regularly shine a light on this doctrine so that we don't forget and slide into Arianism ourselves. Because as I hope you can see, it is not really the mathematics that is at stake here; it is our understanding of God, who God is and what God is like.

Let me give an example of the difference that this makes in practice. Firstly within our worship. Arius would be very happy to see us on our knees before, confessing our sins to God. He would say that the exalted holy God would of course be offended by our sin, and crying out for mercy is the only fit response. But Arius would not be nearly so happy when we break bread in a few minutes time and claim that God is revealed in brokenness, feeling our pain and offering Godself to us, sharing our vulnerability and feeding us with God's own physical body and blood. Arius would thunder that you can't have it both ways. God cannot be both

this, and that. But as Trinitarian believers, we would say, with Athanasius, that these parts of our worship both speak truly of God. God is made known in these three relationships, not all identical, and yet all one God.

And the implications of this do not stop at the church door. These differing images in the liturgy speak truly of the relationships we are called into both inside and outside of the liturgy, in the whole of our relationship with the one God and with God's world.

You are not expected to spend your life grovelling and scraping before God, because the God who grieves over our sin is the same God who comes to us in tender mercy, and lifts us to our feet and dries our eyes and says, "where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you." And it is the same God who soothes your heart when you are anxious and who bursts in like a raging fire when you are complacent. The surprise may be, as I suggested before, that this is the one God. Three-ness might have been much easier to comprehend.