

Date Preached	30-May-2021	Date Initiated	18-May-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Trinity, Yr B

" We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
 With the Father and the Son, the Spirit is worshipped and glorified. "



And so, we come to Trinity Sunday—the Sunday seminarians are warned about in theology class: the one that if there are multiple clergy people on staff at a parish, it will be the least tenured one's privilege (or curse) to preach that day **[look around]**. For on this day, we come face-to-face with one of the most inscrutable aspects of our faith. However we may push or poke at the Trinity, we are tempted to throw up our hands and exclaim, "It's just a big mystery!" My seminary classmates and I, however, were made to *promise* our theology professor that we would never fall back to the 'mystery' message; and so ... here goes.

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To begin, let us say several things about the Trinity that are *relatively* straightforward, if a bit arcane.

- First, the provenance of the Trinity ... why it came to be a *thing* of Christianity, at all: In the Greco-Roman world, polytheism was the norm: the religious pantheon—literally, "all gods"—was numerous. In addition to all the 'big name' gods like Zeus and Juno, virtually every stream or activity or household hearth had some minor deity or spirit associated with it.¹ Gods and demi-gods abounded. The Jewish tradition, by contrast, was strictly and strongly monotheistic. "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut 5:6). Therefore, because two figures—the Father and the Son (to use the traditional language of the Church)—feature prominently in Christianity, *and* because the Holy Spirit lurks, enigmatically, at Scripture's edges ... early on, Christians were at pains to distinguish their religion from the polytheistic paganism² *and* to show their fidelity to the Old Testament commandments for strict monotheism. *Three*—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—*had* to be made to add up ... somehow ... to just *One*.
- Second, questions about how the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit may *inter-relate* didn't arise until a few centuries after the books of our Bible had been written. Accordingly, there are no references to the "Trinity" anywhere in Scripture. It is a product of human doctrine rather than a matter of divine revelation.
- Third, perhaps due to this silence of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity loomed large in the first several centuries of the Church. The idea of a Triune—that is, three-in-one—God was hotly debated among the bishop-theologians of the early Church: sermons and rebuttals; factions and violence; councils and counter-councils. In the end, our theological forbears worked extremely hard to cabin the Trinitarian

mystery—hard-to-define; slippery; elusive—in a set of beliefs that could unify the Church and maintain its peace.³

- To wit, the classical explanation of the mystery of the Trinity⁴: God exists in three Persons. The First Person of God (whom we'll call the Creator) pre-exists all time. The Creator did not *create* the Second Person of God (who later appeared on earth as Jesus), but rather *begot* the Second Person from the First Person—kind of like propagating a new plant from a cutting. Therefore, the First and Second Persons are of identical substance (“consubstantial” is the fancy theological term). And because they are consubstantial, there is no hierarchy of precedence or seniority between them: Each has *always* existed.⁵

And, the Third Person (whom we know as the Holy Spirit) also was not created, but, instead, proceeds from the love—the unity; the dynamic; the energy—between the First Person and the Second Person. This means that the Third Person, the Holy Spirit, is also consubstantial with the First Two, the Father and the Son. And the love-energy that binds the three of them together makes them absolutely inseparable, or “indivisible,” as the theologians say; three things that comprise one single Unity. The Trinity is like three identical planets, each exactly alike in composition, eternally orbiting one another, each bound to the others by their own gravitational pull. They are identical, but distinct; distinct, but inseparable.

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The history and theology of the doctrine of the Trinity may be helpful to know ... or maybe not (!). But in either case, they are not really the stuff of sermons, for they leave God sounding dry, abstract and obscure. And hence, Trinity Sunday, when we celebrate how God-as-Trinity relates directly to *us* ... participates in our daily lives. And to see *this*, let's leave the library and come into the kitchen ... right over here, to the sink.

Think, for a moment, about the water we get from the tap. Most often, we need the *fluid*, flowing form of liquid water: to quench our thirst, clean a pot, brew a beverage or water a plant. Sometimes, however, we need the transforming, 'pushy' properties of *gaseous* water: Steam releases wrinkles from our clothes and also drives giant turbines that generate electricity. And other times, we need the cooling, stilling qualities of *solid* water: ice that changes other liquids into solids (like ice cream); preserves perishables on the way to a picnic; and soothes a burned finger. Whatever the state—liquid, gas or solid—the *substance* of water is exactly the same and never separates. And yet, we encounter water in three different *availabilities*, depending on our need in the specific moment.

So, too, with God. There are times we need ... and need to know ... God the Father, the First Person, the Creator: sempiternal and omnipresent; One who knows us, for having created us; but who also sits 'above' the traumas and trivialities of this world, and helps us glimpse the *divine* perspective. There are times we reach for the God the Word, the Second Person, Christ: the aspect of the Godhead that we are most familiar with, from Jesus' walk on this earth; the personal ... informal, even chatty ... side of God; the One Who knows us not just as a species, but also *intimately*, as sister and brother ... and, ultimately, as Savior. And there are times—times of crisis, of indecision; of great loss and of great joy—when we cry out for ... or simply fall into the loving arms

of ... God the Advocate, the Third Person, the Holy Spirit: the One thickly woven into our lives and beings; always active but rarely perceived; Who knows our every need and never ceases praying on our behalf, even—*especially*—when we lack the words, the energy or the inclination to do so ourselves.

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So far as I can tell, for *God*, the Trinity is completely superfluous: God would still be God without existing as Three-in-One, just as water would still be water if it never boiled or froze. But just as the three availabilities of water make water even more beneficial for us, so, too, the three availabilities of the Trinity: In the ever-evolving circumstances of our lives, each keys to exactly where we are and what we need ... and ensures that our finding God is as easy as turning on the faucet at the kitchen sink.



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¹ The same is true for the Near Eastern religions in the midst of which Judaism developed. There were whole hierarchies and departmentalized responsibilities of gods. Indeed, there are traces of polytheism in the Hebrew Bible itself, such as in psalms that speak of both "God" and "other gods."

² In context, this word is something of an anachronism, but it will suffice for our purposes today.

³ If you'd like, try this on for size (it is from the so-called Creed of St Athanasius, from the early medieval period):

And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity,
neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.
For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.
But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory
equal, the Majesty co-eternal.
Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.
The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

⁴ *I.e.*, in the Western Church. Our Eastern sisters and brothers see the Trinity very differently.

⁵ This is difficult to square with Scripture, I know. The Gospel of St John, for example, certainly seems to place God, Jesus and the Spirit (or Advocate) on different levels.