

# Trinity – Love that never ends



## #1 Trinity and Humanity

Intro – the one thing that unites

**What's the one thing** that unites all people right now? **Isolation.**

Penne and I have friends living for a long time in Paris. For 8 weeks now, they have not been allowed by leave their apartment without filling out an **official government form** to seek permission every time – even to walk their dog Jason!

Their troubles pale in comparison, of course, to the challenges facing **poorer communities** and people in **high risk** categories during this pandemic.

Yet **whoever** we are, we know that **isolation** for protracted periods **can be detrimental** to our wellbeing – for we are, by nature, **relational creatures**.

Back in 2014, a **Harvard** university research study set up **social experiments** of isolation. Participants were offered **two choices**:

- i) They could do nothing but **sit** in a chair and think for **15 minutes** (with no internet and no devices), just sit, or
- ii) They could administer themselves a mild **electric shock** with a device on a table near them and so be released from isolation.



Get this... **2/3 of the men** who participated took **the second option** and **¼ of women** did the same – they **preferred shock treatment** to just 15 minutes of isolation!

**Why is it that humans hate being alone?** What drives us to want and need relationships/community?

## Trinity and Humanity

Today's sermon on **God as Trinity** connects the dots between **knowing God as Triune** - three in one – and knowing **what it means to be human**.

## Word on the Street in 320AD

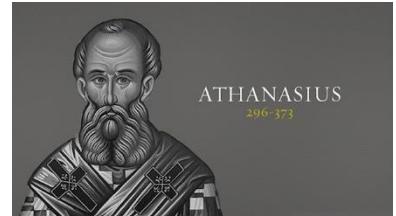
Today Coronavirus is the word on the street, but back in 320AD in the world's greatest city (Constantinople) "The Trinity" was **on everyone's lips**, from publicans to priests to politicians the question of God's Triune nature dominated discussions.



**Christians** suffered persecution for claiming Jesus was truly God. There were even riots and demonstrations on the streets of Alexandria.

A smart priest named **Arius**, with a huge following, **denied Jesus the glory given him in the Scriptures**.<sup>1</sup>

**Then along came Athanasius** of Alexandria and, at great personal cost, he convinced the world's leaders to go on to outlaw Arianism after the **Council of Nicea** in 325AD. After the Council of Constantinople in 381AD the world's Church leaders were universally convinced of the divinity of Christ and all affirmed that **God is One**, yet **three distinct "persons"**, being of the same **substance**, same **power**, and same **eternity**.



About 1200 years later, the Anglican Church expressed the same truth in its 1<sup>st</sup> Article of faith. It affirms one living and true God, and note the last three lines: "...three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity..."

**I. Of Faith in the Holy Trinity.**  
**T**here is but one living and true GOD, everlasting, without Body, Parts, or Passions; of infinite Power, Wisdom, and Goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all Things both visible and invisible. And in Unity of this Godhead, there be three Persons, of one Substance, Power, and Eternity; the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.

## Why worry?

But I hear you saying, "Why bother with this?" Isn't it **sufficient just to keep it simple** and have faith in Jesus? Don't doctrines just divide us?

Well, no one's going to argue you out of trusting in Jesus today. Yet, even the New Testament urges us to go on from **baby milk** to **dining on the full meal** of knowing God (e.g. Hebrews 5).<sup>2</sup> In our reading from John 14, Jesus invited his disciples to **deepen their knowledge of God** through him and see beyond his

<sup>1</sup> He said something like... "Look at God up there, pure and perfect. Our world is so very far from perfect, surely God can't get his hands dirty. I know what happened. One day God made Jesus and the Holy Spirit so they could do the dirty work for him and so God could stay up there all safe and untroubled".

<sup>2</sup> 5:12,13

earthly ministry (e.g. Jn. 14:9, 10) to doing **even great things than he** on earth as they came to know God in a deeper way (Jn. 14:12).

Another reason to take the Trinity seriously is that knowing God as Triune helps us to address the earlier question I asked – Why is it that we humans **hate isolation** so much and instead **crave community**?

Christianity responds: "... because we are **made in the image of God** whose very essence as our **Creator is relational and self-giving**.

### [\*\*What knowing God as Trinity means to our humanity\*\*](#)

The Book of Genesis speaks of the connection between the nature of the Living God and our **origins** and **identity**. In Genesis 1:26 and 27 we read:

God said, 'Let us make humankind in **our image**, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion... So humankind was created in God's image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them.

The New Testament too connects the **unity and diversity** in God the relational nature of our journey as Christians. In John Chapter 14 Jesus says....

If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Vs 7

I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me. Vs 10

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever- the Spirit of truth. Vs 16

Nevertheless, God as Trinity cannot be contained or explained in a few verses of Scripture. The early church struggled to sufficiently express this in words to use to worship God for some 400 years till finding universal agreement.

Below, Dr. Mike Bird gives us an acronym **using the letters of the word "Triune"** to capture some of the key points from the rich history of questioning and learning that lies behind our worship of God today...

T stands for **There is only one God** – Jesus of Nazareth affirmed the cry of all faithful Jews in Mark 12:29 saying, "the Lord our God, the Lord is One". Yet at the same time he made claims in word and deed of his own

equality with God. He affirmed the unity of God while displaying something of the diversity in God.

**R** stands for **Relations of origin** – As the **Nicene Creed affirms**, God the Father is unbegotten, God the Son is eternally begotten, and God the Holy Spirit is eternally proceeding. That is, **all three** “persons” in God are **equal in eternity**, having no beginning in the sense that creation has a beginning.<sup>3</sup>

**I** stands for **individual operations** – that is, each person of the Holy Trinity has **distinct works** appropriate to who they are (yet each is inseparable and involved e.g. in the act of creation and salvation).

**U** stands for **united in being** – Whether we look to the testimony of Jesus, the witness of the Apostles, or teachings from the likes of Athanasius or Augustine, all point to the **Son and Spirit** as being of **same essence or substance** as God the **Father**.<sup>4</sup>

**N** stands for **no subordination** – An important assertion by the Church is that the three persons of the godhead are **equal in authority and power** within the godhead (not a captain with two deputies).

**E** stands for **every Christian should be a Trinitarian!**

We are image-bearers of this God who is fundamentally **relational** and **eternally self-giving**. This mysterious **loving** community is beyond our full comprehension, however, Jesus gave us assurance that we can sufficiently come to say we “know God” (read John chapter 14:1-17 through again with this in mind and thank God for this amazing promise).

The New Testament tells us we are being re-made into **God’s image**<sup>5</sup>, which gives us hope our lives can be shaped to more and more reflect that loving self-giving nature of God in our lives.

Here are **four implications** for our understanding of humanity that flow from knowing God as Trinity:

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<sup>3</sup> e.g. In Genesis 1 the spirit of God hovers over the water, in John 1, the “Word”, who is the Son, was with God in the beginning.

<sup>4</sup> Athanasius insisted on the Greek word *homoousios*, not *homoiousios* as Arius which infers “like” not “same”)

<sup>5</sup> Titus 3:4-7; Phil. 1:6

1. **People matter**<sup>6</sup> – You may think all agree. Not so! Even last week Donald Trump showed again that he considers **some people groups** of more value than **others**. An opinion piece in *The Australian* last week suggested that older people in our nation shouldn't necessarily be given the same access to health care as younger people. We should be alarmed at the “survival of the fittest” philosophies and the utilitarian ethics of the likes of Dawkins or Singer respectively. They and others have influenced a rejection of the sacredness of all lives. Instead, pragmatism reigns and we find that some are “**more equal than others**”. If ever there was an opportunity to pause and **reassess** how our nation treats all its peoples, surely this pandemic offers it. Christian author, Miroslav **Wolf** tweeted wisely: “The care of people must become the context within which you think the economy, as opposed to the care of the economy as the context in which you think about people”<sup>7</sup> Knowing God as Trinity moves us to make all God’s **image-bearing** people **matter**.
2. **Self-giving service matters.** Ancient religions taught that humans were made **to serve the gods**. But Christianity uniquely believes in the Triune God who **serves humanity**, especially as seen in sending God the Son to facilitate our rescue from sin and death. When Christians serve others, it’s not to appease God, nor is it to manipulate God to give a reward,. Instead, we serve because we are **being remade** to in the likeness of **God** and it is in our new nature, identity, and purpose to do so.
3. **How we use power matters.** Genesis 1 says humans were given “**dominion**”, or authority, by God on earth. The advent of Jesus showed up how grossly humanity has **distorted** such God-given **power**.<sup>8</sup> In Christ we see that **humility is the key** to godly authority, not domination.<sup>9</sup> But humility is not in *our* nature and we need the renewing work of the **Holy Spirit** to renovate our hearts.

People Matter. Service Matters. How we use Power matters, and lastly and most importantly...

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<sup>6</sup> I do not mean that they matter more than the rest of Creation, but that all people equally matter to God

<sup>7</sup> Willie Jennings quote in a recent podcast convo with Miroslav Wolf

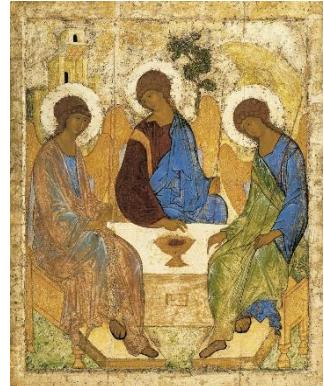
<sup>8</sup> Consider the lyrics of Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55

<sup>9</sup> Read Philippians 2:3-11

4. **Love matters** – Love **lives** in the Triune God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We Christians love others because **God first loved us.**<sup>10</sup> Loving relationships of unity of diversity are fundamental to **being human**, and ought to be part of the journey of being **re-made** in God's image.

### An Image depicting the Trinity?

Let me leave you with a 15<sup>th</sup> century icon Russian artist Andrei Rublev. It references Genesis Chapter 18, when Abraham offered hospitality to **three divine strangers**. In the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, many Christians believed those three strangers to be a **glimpse of God as Trinity**.



- Note the **three distinct figures** sitting around the table.
- Each has the same youthful face that could be male or female, representing the **one central essence** of the living God.
- The three figures **form a circle**, representing the profound unity and diversity within the living God.
- And, see, there is a **fourth place at the table**. The dynamic love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the living God draws the world, the worshipper, you and I, into the scene to share in life with God. The love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for each other **overflows** into a creative, self-sacrificing love for the world, and forms a **loving community** of grace.

Take time to reflect on the 4 implications of knowing God as Trinity listed above in this sermon. Do people matter to you like they do to God? Is self-giving part of who you want to become? How is power handled in your daily life? How much does love matter to you?

1 John 4:7 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

Steve Webster, St Michaels North Carlton, May 2020

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<sup>10</sup> 1 John 4:19