

## **Sermon for 12<sup>th</sup> June 2022, Year C, Trinity Sunday**

**Preached at St Michael Smarden, and All Saints Biddenden**

**John 16:12-15**

### **Sermon**

There's a famous cartoon video on YouTube that's now been watched 1.7 million times which imagines wise and knowledgeable St Patrick trying to explain the nature of the Holy Trinity to two Irish peasant farmers – except the farmers secretly know full well how impossible it is to explain the Trinity; so they remorseless mock Patrick by telling him which of the many heresies he is expressing every time he tries to use an analogy to explain how Father, Son and Holy Spirit can possibly be one God in three persons, distinct but of the same substance.

First the fictional Patrick tries to explain the Trinity using the analogy of water that can be a liquid, a gas, or solid ice – so three different forms but all essentially the same stuff. But this is the heresy of modalism – condemned at the first council of Constantinople in 381AD, and the Irish farmers are not impressed. The Trinity is not three forms of the same God, but three distinct persons!

Patrick then tries again, and compares the Trinity to the way the Sun sends forth heat and light, like God the Father sending forth Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But this is 'Arianism!' the farmers reply, which is the heresy that God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not of the same divine substance but that the Father creates the Son and Holy Spirit, like the sun creates heat and light. Patrick is foiled again.

A third time St Patrick tries to come up with an analogy to explain the Trinity. This time he holds up a three-leaf clover and begins to argue that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are like the three leaves – three clearly separate and individual persons – but also joined together and part of the same being. "Oh

no, Patrick,” says one of the farmers, ‘you’re about to confess the heresy that God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are not in themselves the entirety of God but are in fact only parts of God’.

And so, the fictional St Patrick takes a deep breath and tries to explain the Trinity using the words of the ancient Athanasian creed...

“We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Spirit unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinities, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Spirit Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord...”

‘Oh! Well, why didn’t you say so?’ respond the three Irish farmers, satisfied at last.

Well, I’m glad that’s all sorted. And that easily digestible paragraph was quite sufficient all the way until the Great Schism of 1054, when the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches fell out over whether the Holy Spirit is sent to us by the Father *and* the Son, or only by the Father, since the bible says both in different places in John’s gospel. It’s hard to believe, but that tiny disagreement caused a rift in Christianity that has still not healed to this day.

But John's main goal was never really to explain in detail the precise way that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are related to each other. For him it was sufficient to declare that there is one God, and God the Father is God, and Jesus Christ is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and leave it at that.

What John wants to make clear is that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all teaching the same things, and working together to love and redeem all of creation. The Holy Spirit speaks what he receives from Jesus, and everything that Jesus has belongs to the Father. And so, the only way that Jesus Christ is different to the Holy Spirit is that Jesus was a human being who was present on earth in one time and place to redeem humanity, while the Holy Spirit is present throughout creation, teaching us more about Jesus, and inspiring us to wisdom and to love. If we say any more than this, we start to make up new heresies of our own! And some may wonder if I have already gone too far!

Sometimes this all seems so complicated and tiresome that we might wish the church had simply accepted the heretical view that Jesus was just a human being blessed by God for a special purpose but otherwise no different to the rest of us. But instead, we have a faith that is absolutely immersed and rooted in a God who is himself three persons continually in a dynamic relationship of unconditional and mutual love.

If you'll forgive another long word, theologians call this relationship 'perichoresis', which from the Greek literally means "dancing around". You'll recognise 'peri' from 'perimeter', and 'choresis' from 'choreography'.

So the Trinity of God is a three-person joyful divine dance of love, into which all of creation is invited and welcomed. And this is why, sometimes, you might find a painting of the Trinity which shows three dancers, weaving in and out between each other, so that everything each dancer does is related and connected to everything the others do, and are.

This is an image and a reality that the idea of a lone, distant, self-contained God cannot really convey. However we ended up with this astonishing description of God as a dynamic interwoven Trinity of persons, three in one and one in three, united in diversity, it has become the defining characteristic of our faith, and utterly vital to our understanding of who Jesus is, how the Holy Spirit transforms us, and how God the Father calls each of us to reach out with childlike arms to become part of this wonderful dance of love that is surely the very purpose and the heart of all creation.

Song at midday:

God of almighty, changeless energy, creation's secret source, holding all things, in perfect rhythmic dance.

The heavens tell the glory of your work; day moving on to day, and night to night proclaim its ordered sway.

Within our changing swiftly passing lives unite all hearts with yours, that praising we may enter heaven's courts.