

Explaining the Trinity

by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 30th May 2026 at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Readings: Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

(Lectionary readings for Trinity Sunday, Year A)

Introduction

In the film *Keeping Mum*, Rowan Atkinson plays a vicar who is speaking to a convention of clergy on the theme of “God’s mysterious ways”. His talk ends with these words:

‘Isaiah chapter 55 verse 8 “My ways are not your ways”. And I think, what he basically means by that is “I’m mysterious, folks. Live with it”.’

Today is Trinity Sunday, and so I thought I ought to take the opportunity to speak about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: that God is three persons in one God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This is a formula that baffles many people. How can there be only one God, if there are three persons? After all, $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$. Aha, but $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$.

If you’re hoping that I’m going to *explain* the Trinity, then I’m afraid you will be disappointed. But I can tell you why Christians believe in the Trinity – it’s simply that this is the best description of the different ways God has chosen to reveal himself to humanity. Although the Bible itself never

speaks of the Trinity as such, this was clearly a way of thinking that the writers of the New Testament were moving towards, as shown in the two bible readings today – the well-known prayer at the end of 2 Corinthians, which we have come to know as “the Grace”¹, and the formula for baptising new believers that Jesus uses at the end of Matthew’s Gospel – “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”.²

As we begin our whistle-stop tour of the doctrine of the Trinity, please think about your own relationship with God, and what knowing God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit might mean to you.

God the Father

Let’s start with God the Father, the ruler of the universe.

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of the glory and majesty of God, that fills the temple and the whole earth, leaving the prophet awe-struck and conscious of his own sin in the face of God’s utter holiness.³ We need to cultivate something of that sense of awe in our own worship here in church and in our prayers.

¹ 2 Corinthians 13:13

² Matthew 28:19

³ Isaiah 6:1-8



God is the all-powerful Ruler of the Universe, but before that, of course, he is its Creator. In a well-known painting by William Blake, God is shown holding a pair of dividers, like a craftsman, carefully measuring as he creates the universe. This reflects descriptions of God the Creator in chapter 40 of the book of Isaiah.⁴

In Psalm 8 the poet admires the night sky, marvelling at the moon and stars, which he describes as “the work of God’s fingers.”⁵ Similarly, Psalm 19 says that

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.⁶

You may know Haydn’s setting of these words in *The Creation*. St Paul in his letter to the Romans speaks of how the created order reveals much about the nature of God.⁷ If you want to spend some time reflecting on the wonder of creation, with all its amazing complexity and vitality, you could do worse than meditate on Psalm 104, a poem celebrating the many aspects of the creation – or you could watch a programme by David Attenborough.

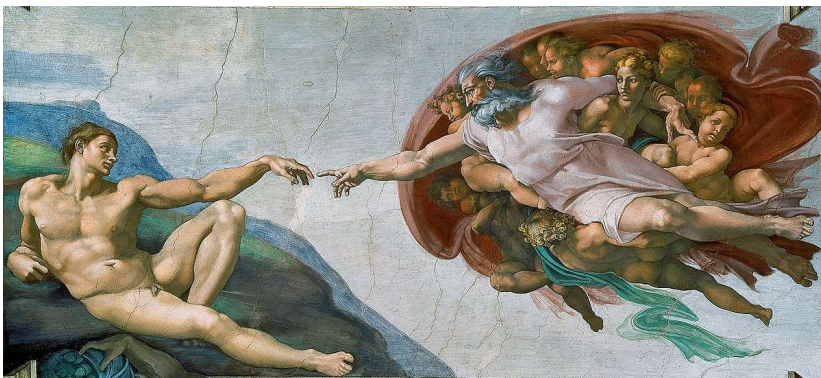
⁴ Isaiah 40:12-14, 25-31

⁵ Psalm 8:4

⁶ Psalm 19:1 NRSV

⁷ Romans 1:19-20

According to the Bible, God's final triumph in creation was to make human beings, as we see in Michaelangelo's famous painting in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican.



In this picture the artist shows God's

forefinger reaching out to touch Adam's, and the two characters are looking straight at each other. God is slightly higher than Adam, representing his superior status, but only just. Humanity is, in the words of the psalm, only "a little lower than the angels"⁸. God here is not a distant creator, but a God who reaches out to the human race, seeking connection.

I wonder if you're familiar with the Simpsons TV show. In



this, God is sometimes part of the story, but we never see his face. It's a recognition by the artist that it is impossible to show what God is like. No representation could begin to properly describe the Almighty. In fact, both Judaism and Islam forbid any representation of God. I

⁸ Psalm 8:5

suppose the fact that Christian art dares to show any image of God at all must be due to the fact that Jesus encouraged us to call God Father. Jesus has made God much more approachable and personal, so we sense that perhaps he wouldn't mind too much if we paint him as an old man with a beard.

The Old Testament contains some indirect references to God as Father. Now I'm aware that if you've had a negative or traumatic experience of a human father, thinking of God as Father may not be easy. But when God is described as Father in the Bible, it is as kind, compassionate and forgiving, as in this example from Psalm 103:

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

For he knows of what we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.⁹

God is also described by Isaiah as being like a mother:

As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you.¹⁰

Imagine a child who is frightened or hurt, clinging to his or her mother. It's a powerful image of God.

Let me summarise what we have uncovered about the mystery of God so far: God is majestic, awesome and holy, and recognising this makes us, like Isaiah, conscious of our own sinfulness and unworthiness. He is the all-powerful and all-wise Creator, but he also reaches out to humanity,

⁹ Psalm 103:13-14

¹⁰ Isaiah 66:13

seeking a relationship with us. And he is also described in terms of a compassionate Father or Mother.

God the Son

We've looked so far at what the Old Testament tells us about God, God's revelation of himself to the Jewish nation. But in the New Testament God goes one stage further. He reveals himself to the world by taking the form of the man Jesus. John's Gospel opens with a famous passage in which the Word of God, the Son of God from all eternity, became flesh and dwelt among us. As John writes,

No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the side of the Father, has made him known.¹¹

Jesus the Son of God reveals God to us. The important thing about Jesus is that he was fully human, not that he was a man rather than a woman. God is neither male nor female, and according to Genesis 1:27 men and women are equally created in the image of God. Besides, had Jesus been a woman in the patriarchal society of the 1st Century AD, social conventions would have prevented him from having the ministry that he had.

How do you imagine Jesus? There have been so many representations of him in the art of different cultures, and of course in film. You may have seen Franco Zeffirelli's TV series *Jesus of Nazareth* in the 1970s, or the more recent TV series *The Chosen*.

¹¹ John 1:18 ESV

Most Western art shows Jesus as a rather good-looking young man, although in *The Chosen* he does look a little more Middle-Eastern.



Other representations of Jesus are symbolic rather than realistic, particularly in icons from the Orthodox Church tradition. Here Jesus typically has a halo that includes the shape of a cross, his right hand is

raised in blessing and he holds a book, representing the gospel, in his left hand.

You probably know the famous painting by Holman Hunt, entitled *The Light of the World*, the original of which is in Keble College, Oxford, and a much larger version hangs in St Paul's Cathedral in London. The artist shows Jesus as a priest, with a kingly crown that contains thorns, as well as a lantern, knocking on the door of the human heart. Underneath are words from Revelation 3:20 – “Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice



and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” Here Jesus is seeking relationship with us – but it’s up to us to open the door.

God the Holy Spirit

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is the most difficult person of the Trinity to represent in art. The most common representation of the Spirit is as a dove, which derives from the accounts of Jesus’ baptism in the gospels, where Jesus sees the Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove. Other paintings show the flames on the Day of Pentecost resting on Jesus’ disciples as they are filled with the Spirit.



In John chapter 3 Jesus uses the image of wind to speak of the Spirit. The Greek word for spirit is also the word for wind (pneuma), and the same is true in Hebrew (ruah). The Spirit of God, like the wind, is invisible, and blows where it wills. What we experience is the effect that the Spirit has. Jesus speaks of being “born of the Spirit”, or “born from above” or “born again”. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we can enter into a personal relationship with God, where we

know God as our Father, not just in theory but in our own experience. This was the Spirit who came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, sending them out into the world to proclaim what God had done in Christ.

This personal experience of God is what Paul is writing about in the passage from Romans 8:14-16.

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God... You have received the Spirit of adoption. When we cry “Abba, Father”, it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God.

Just as Jesus is the Son of God, and was filled with the Spirit at his baptism, so Christians have been adopted as children of God through the Holy Spirit, who enables us to have that same intimate relationship with God as our Father.

Conclusion: the Relational God

This God is not just the “first cause” of the universe, nor is he just a King who rules the universe and will one day judge it, though these are real aspects of his nature. He is also a loving Father who wants to have an intimate relationship with each of his children. This was the God whom Jesus came to reveal, a God we can know personally through the mysterious but very tangible workings of his Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is not a puzzle that we have to solve, a formula to try to understand. It is a way of describing a God whom we can know for ourselves, when we are willing to trust him, to receive his love into our hearts and to love him in return.



There is a well-known painting by the Russian artist Rublev which shows the three persons of the Trinity gathered around a table, a symbol of fellowship. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are in relationship with each other, and from their posture seem to be inviting us to join them in their bond of love. The doctrine of the

Holy Trinity speaks to us of a God who is *relational*, and wants to share his life with us.

So, that's the end of our little tour around the doctrine of the Trinity. We've explored the mysterious nature of God, and seen how he has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, providing three ways that we can relate to him.

And the best way to relate to God is through prayer. Do you find it easier to pray to God the Father or Jesus Christ? Or both? What about praying to the Holy Spirit?

How will our exploration today help you to pray and to live as a Christian? I invite you to spend some time each day this week reflecting on your relationship with each person of the Trinity. Ask God to show you more of his nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And then think about this person of the Trinity as you go about your daily life.