



Sermon preached by Faith Paulding on 31st May 2026

Readings: Psalm 8; Isaiah 40:12-17, 27-31; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28; 16-20

Trinity Sunday

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable unto you O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Since December the lectionary has been taking us on a journey. We have moved from the expectation and waiting of Advent to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and the ongoing revelation of God through the life and ministry and Christ. We have walked through the pain of the Passion to the cross and then delighted in the joy of the resurrection. Now we have entered the period of Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the challenge of how to understand the mystery of the trinity.

The number three has held a significance in human history for thousands of years. It is imbued with mystique, a power that has put it at the centre of rules governing effective communication within all aspects of culture. When it comes to communicating ideas, human beings process information through instinctive pattern recognition. To communicate effectively, the patterns need to be as small as possible – and the smallest number required to make a pattern is three.

The Rule of Three uses three-element patterns to communicate complex ideas effectively. The pattern works because it is short, memorable and powerful (and there is an example of the rule of Three in oratory). Some of the most powerful men in history, including Winston Churchill and Barack Obama fill their speeches with Rule of Three techniques to persuade, to assure, and to rule. (And, yes, there it is again!). The phrase attributed to Julius Caesar ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’ is yet another example. Rule of Three techniques also inform marketing theory and are commonly used in advertising. The Rule of Three has created some of the most powerful advertising slogans of the twentieth century. ‘Snap! Crackle! Pop!’, ‘Beanz Meanz Heinz’, ‘Every little helps’; three little words instantly bring a brand name or product to mind. However, the rule of Three is not confined to linguistics. In physics there are Newton’s three laws of motion. In music, the building blocks of harmony are three-note chords. In art and photography the rule of thirds are the principles of composition. Drama is built around a three-act structure: the list goes on and on.

It is hardly surprising then to see the Rule of Three reflected in religion. The most popular and recommended sermon structure is a three-point sermon. But it is also intrinsic to our understanding of the divine. Today we have heard the closing words of both Matthew’s gospel and the second of Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth. The conclusion of Matthew’s gospel is entitled ‘The Great Commission’ and is Jesus’ final instruction to the disciples who have gathered at the mountain. They are told to go and make disciples, baptise and teach (a Rule of Three). Verse 11 of Chapter 13 of Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth also contains a Rule of Three; “Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace. And, of course, both Mark and Paul’s last sentences contain a reference to the trinity: “in the name if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” and the familiar benediction, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all”.

The familiarity of that common blessing may mean that we forget its theological importance. ‘Communion’ is a rendering of the Greek word *koinonia*, which means sharing or participation. Paul is saying that our life of faith is brought about by our participating in the life of God through the work of the Holy Spirit within and between each one of us. It is for this reason that we are brothers and sisters, for this reason that we have unity as the body of Christ.

Unity comprised of distinct elements is the mystery and dilemma that baffled the early Christian fathers as they grappled to develop a doctrine and understanding of the trinity. It took until 325AD for the Council of Nicaea to finally approve a formal statement. Human language struggles and is limited in its ability to describe the divine. In his account of the first Pentecost, Luke tried to describe the manner in which the Holy Spirit came in human terms; but it is never possible to fully explain a divine mystery; all that we can do is to compare it to experiences from our earthly world. Human verbal imagery is used to depict something never seen before. The sound was, “like the rush of a violent wind” and then, “divided tongues, as of fire”. The mystery of the three-fold revelation of God also struggles with human explanation. In order to understand the idea of one single undivided god who is also three distinct persons has led people to use different analogies to try to explain the mystery. St Patrick used a shamrock – but this falls short in that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not each a third of God that together make one whole. A more contemporary analogy is how water can be ice, liquid or steam – but this falls short as the same liquid cannot be ice, water and steam all at the same time. The idea that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different revelations of God as opposed to three distinct persons within the Godhead was condemned as heresy by Sabellius in the third century.

I do rather like the bicycle wheel analogy, but that is not perfect either for the same reasons as the shamrock. However, there is a way to imagine how something could be both three distinct things and at the same time one single thing which is a bit complex but also appeals to me. You need to use your imagination a bit, but just think about what it would be like to live in a two-dimensional world. There is backwards and forwards, left and right but there is no up or down. The inhabitants of this world are all flat two-dimensional shapes: circles, squares, triangles and so on. They have no knowledge of the third dimension and no frame of reference for conceiving of up or down. Now imagine that a three-dimensional being like me entered this flat world. Maybe I reach three fingers of my hand in. My hand is, of course, one single thing but as it enters into the two-dimensional world its two-dimensional inhabitants will perceive it as three separate circles, three two-dimensional shapes that are completely separate and distinct. If I tried to explain to the two-dimensional creatures that these three circles are really one single hand and if they could only get up above their two-dimensional world, they would understand how these three circles are at the exact same time one thing they wouldn't be able to comprehend as they wouldn't have a frame of reference for what 'up' means. The idea that the three circles they clearly see as separate are at the same time one single thing would make no sense. This is not really an analogy for the trinity itself as much as it is an analogy for how the trinity is a mystery. If God is the creator of the universe he must exist in dimensions beyond our experience. Just as the third dimension is beyond our imaginary friends two-dimensional world so there is no way for three dimensional beings like us to conceive of how a God from dimensions beyond our own can be three distinct persons and at the same time one single God.

The challenge that we are faced with is not so much how we, as Christians, understand the one God in trinity and trinity in unity but how we explain it to other people. When Mohammed was a young man, he spent nomadic years reflecting and praying in his search for a deepening relationship and understanding of God. On his travels Mohammed met early Christian evangelists but their inability to articulate their understanding of the trinity lead Mohammed to the conclusion that Christians worshipped three gods – not the one true God. How different the world might be today if those early Christians had been more coherent about their beliefs.

Jesus' instructions to the disciples in the Great Commission was to make more disciples and it is implied that we who are disciples ourselves must do the same – make more disciples. The original eleven disciples who came down from the mountain did amazing things. In AD25 nobody outside a

small town in Galilee had heard of Jesus. By AD50 there were riots in Rome because of him and by AD65 his followers were being persecuted by the emperor himself. All roads led to Rome; once Rome knew of something, everywhere else knew quite soon afterwards. It took another 300 or so years but without social media, modern day transport or global communication Christianity was established by St Ninian in Scotland.

Disciples today have a different challenge. We have the means of communication and travel to do our part in making more disciples but we are dealing, certainly in our own culture, with a society that is, at best, apathetic towards religion and, at worse, positively antagonistic towards it. So explaining our faith and our understanding of the trinity, which we've already established, is hard to put into words, is quite a gauntlet to pick up. I would suggest that rather than try to explain the concept of one God in trinity, trinity in unity it would be more helpful to focus on explaining our personal relationship with the trinity in human terms that can be understood.

I had a very very good relationship with my father. He taught me many things. He helped introduce me to a faith in God. With him I felt safe, protected, secure. So I can relate to God as father. However, other people have not had the privilege that I enjoyed. They may have suffered at the hands of abuse or neglect; or been deprived of a father's love through death or separation. For such people, talking of God as father is unhelpful and even traumatic. Being sensitive to other people's brokenness should make us careful in the terminology we use. I also encounter God through Creation, through the natural world; and certainly in awe, wonder and amazement (Rule of Three again!). I sense the nature of God through their grace and forgiveness and through the fruits of the Spirit – especially love, joy and peace. Talking about my love of God and desire to know Him better can be put into human words whereas the concept of the trinity cannot.

As I come across obstacles, conundrums, problems in my daily life it is Jesus Christ that helps me find the right or best way forward. It is the human manifestation of the divine that helps model for me the way that I should live my life. When I get things wrong, which I do – frequently, it is usually because I have sped ahead on my own and left Jesus behind. What I try to do, you could say, is to walk the walk with Jesus and talk the talk with God.

In chapter 40 of Isaiah we heard the prophet addressing a downbeat, depressed people. God assures them that renewed energy will come as they 'wait for the Lord'. Strength and empowerment comes to those in quiet contemplation, worship and reflection. Pentecost was not just the church's launch pad. Pentecost is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us now

I had the privilege of officiating at a rather large funeral a number of years ago. The family and close friends included Christians, agnostics, atheists and those who believed that physical death is the ultimate end. It was obviously challenging to meet all those needs within in a Christian funeral and one of the biggest challenges was at the cremation where virtually the whole service was in prayer. As I looked up at the start it was obvious that to many of those there, prayer was a completely foreign language of which they had no knowledge or understanding. So I asked people not to think of the words as directed to God, but to close their eyes and to try to find a quiet place within themselves where the words could just fall into - not as thoughts, but almost as drops of water into a still pool. The response afterwards led me to believe that the Holy Spirit already rests within every single one of us but is just waiting to be called upon and recognised.

The Holy Spirit doesn't waft around the world as an elusive cloud waiting for us to bump into it. The Holy Spirit dwells within all of us. It is only when we learn to connect with it that it can flow through our being and express itself in the world. The Holy Spirit is a quietness, a stillness, a calm that rests in

the very core of our being. It is the voice whispering to us to be heard.

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – one God in Trinity. An understanding of the Trinity allows us to grasp something of the nature of God, to enter into personal fellowship with Him, to experience Her in the world today and to communicate our knowledge of Them to others. But there is also Unity in Trinity and if we try to take the Trinity apart then it is like taking the petals off a rose – we will destroy the very thing that we seek to expose.

Amen

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