

I know that while some of us have our roots in the Anglican church many have not and so you may not be familiar with the Quicunque vult – or the Athanasian creed, which has been used in the Christian church since the sixth century and especially on Trinity Sunday because it does set out our faith in God who is three in one, God the Trinity.

It uses such phrases as “The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible,” which leads most to believe the idea of the Holy Trinity is incomprehensible. People may try to explain it in terms of water, ice and steam or clover leaves or three legged stools but for many of us it is more like Jake the Peg from the Rolf Harris song whose third leg was unnecessary and made him odd. How do we understand this idea of three in one and one in three?

Well the creed does help us with clear statements such as:

“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 co-eternal. What the Father is, that is what the Son is, and also what the Holy Spirit is.”

However even if we were to go through the whole creed we might still be confused so on this Trinity Sunday let me try and help both explain and apply the doctrine of the Trinity.

Let’s start by going backwards to go forwards. Like many of you I watch television occasionally. You will be glad to hear that I no longer actually believe that I have people miniaturised inside my TV, but I still don’t understand it. I see the TV and I know that I am receiving a picture from the camera that is at Lords or Louisiana. I experience the picture but I can’t understand how it is done. But I could go back from that experience and get a learned person to explain to me how it all happens but with my limited mind I’m afraid I might struggle. There is the experience and from it we can go back and work out the technology. So I think with the Trinity for many of us we experience the Trinity in our salvation. That is what we have in that passage from Eph 2. The whole chapter is about salvation in Jesus and v18 says, “For through him (that is Jesus) we both (that is Jewish believer and gentile believer) have access to the Father by one Spirit.”

What God said there is what we experience isn’t it? We recognise the Holy Spirit opening our hearts and helping us to see who Jesus is and why he died for us and in drawing us to him the Spirit draws us through him back into a relationship with our heavenly father. We also experience it in prayer as we come to the Father through the Son by the Spirit. We experience the Trinity in our lives Father, Son and Holy Spirit and from there we can go backwards with someone who can explain it to us. There is the experience and from it we can go back and work out the theology.

To help us with that, let me take a couple of Bible examples. In John 8, Jesus claimed to be the light of the world. The Pharisees asked for proof and for someone else to validate what Jesus was saying. In v18 he claimed his father as witness.... which led into a long debate as to who his father is. So we come to v54-56 where Jesus said, “My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him...Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” That brought a sharp response from the Pharisees in v57, “You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!” and Jesus statement in v58, “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”. There he claimed to be God, not in so many words but the Jews understood what he was claiming as we see in v59 where they took up stones to put him to death for blasphemy. Now it is not direct teaching which says I am one of the Trinity but here as elsewhere we see Jesus claiming to be God and certainly the NT writers understood that as is shown in such verses as Col 2.9, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.”

Then as we look at the teaching about the Holy Spirit and see him described in different places in the Bible as the Spirit of truth, grace, and glory as being all powerful, life giving and being called Lord we can only come to the conclusion that he is God.

So we work back and we see the Father as God, the Son as God and the Spirit as God and we have either three god's or one God in three persons.

So we go backwards to go forwards. You may feel we have gone backwards but haven't yet gone forwards. So let's secondly get to the heart of the trinity.

There can be no doubt that the Bible presents to us a picture of there being one God. We see this in the O.T. where despite the plethora of idols and gods around Israel sought to remain true to their God to the Holy One of Israel. In the NT. the words of Jesus “Hear O Israel the Lord our God is one Lord”(Mark 12:29). Writ large in Scripture is the point that there is only one God. We start from that basis. So no matter what else we find through our experience or in the teaching it has to fit in with that basic premise. There is one God.

Yet we see this distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For while Jesus knew he was God he knew he wasn't the Father for he spoke of the Father and prayed to the Father. There is a distinction between the Son and the Father. Then there is a distinction between the Son and the Spirit, whom Jesus promised to send to the disciples. The Spirit is God and yet Jesus said “I will send him to you” (John 16:7). There is a distinction and we often express this distinction by describing Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the three persons of the Trinity. However, with our modern understanding of person that may seem to us like three different people and mean our God is a committee!

Not only do we see a distinction of person but also of function. The Father sent the Son into the world to save the world and, from Heb 1.3, “after he had provided purification for sins he sat down at the right hand side of the Majesty in heaven” From there the Father and the Son sent out the Holy Spirit to be with the disciples in every age, the indwelling power of God. So not only is there distinction of person but of function and yet there is unity. For Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), which means one essence. He is God as the Father is God and the Spirit is God they have the same essence the same being.

Have you ever had a ball of string which gets into a total muddle all twisted round with knots here and there? You may feel we have arrived there. Let me try and straighten it out. We have one God who has revealed himself to us in three persons with differing functions and yet an inherent unity of essence. That is the heart of the Trinity. Now if you are still awake you may well say so what?

How does all this affect us?

Let me suggest three things:

1. It affects us in terms of God's sovereignty.

We are able to proclaim clearly that our God reigns. There never has ceased to be a time when God has ceased to rule over creation. The Father has remained on the throne in control of the whole of creation and working out his will over all creation through the whole of human history. Even when God the Son entered into the world God the father remained as the ruler over creation and even today as God the Holy Spirit dwells in us Our God father and Son reign supreme in the majesty and glory of heaven.

2. It affects us in terms of salvation.

How is someone saved? The Bible makes it clear we are saved by God and supremely by God coming into our world to seek and save us. He left all the glory of Heaven came to earth to die on Calvary. But heaven was not empty of God because God the Father sent the God the Son into the world to save the world. Then he came at one point in history and died taking the punishment that we deserve for our sin and rebellion against God and then he returned to that glory of heaven. But God still seeks to save us and still comes to us to bring us salvation as he comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. He, as God, opens us to see the sin in our lives the need of forgiveness and that in Christ we can be forgiven and restored as children of the heavenly Father. Can you see the Trinity at work through history and in our own lives bringing us salvation?

3. It affects our Christian life day by day.

As we live as children of God the Trinity comes into play. It is the Holy Spirit at work in us who is God in dwelling us. Through the Holy Spirit we are made into the likeness of Jesus, so that we please the Father. In this way we should be working with God. That is

a. we should be wanting to please God our father by living his way

b. we should be looking to Jesus our role model the author and perfecter of our faith and

c. we should be open to the Holy Spirit who changes us into the likeness of Christ. Indeed it is the Spirit who creates in us the desire to please God the Father and it is the Spirit who continually turns our eyes onto Jesus. So being open to the Spirit of God in us is a key to living in the light of the Trinity. We remain open to the Spirit through the word of God, which is the sword of the spirit, to hear how we may please God our Father and we come in prayer to God our Father relying upon his power to enable us to follow Christ and live in a way that will please him. Can you see the Trinitarian pattern? The trinity affects us through the sovereignty of God, through or salvation and through our Christian living.

The Holy Trinity may still after all this be a bit of a fog to you. But hopefully even if you still can't quite work out that we worship “one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance”. Yet you will be able to see that we live in the light of a triune God Father, Son and Holy Spirit.