

Three Is The Magic Number

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by Rev Paul Graham



It feels somewhat appropriate that the final “Thought for the Week” of this current run (who knows if we will ever return to this?) should be on Trinity Sunday, the day in the church calendar that signifies one of the great mysteries of our faith. To go through a detailed discussion on the makeup, theology and definition of the Trinity would take several volumes of work, let alone a few hundred words on a lowly webpage in our corner of Suffolk. Even to tell the story of the development of the Trinity as part of the

distinctiveness of the Christian faith would take up more words than all the previous “Thoughts” put together (over 60,000 since March 2020 if you’re interested), though it is a fascinating part of early church history.

And this is part of the problem when tackling the Trinity – there are only a limited number of biblical references to the three-in-one nature of God. Most of the development of the Trinity came after the last of the New Testament writers had gone to glory.

One of the most famous instances when we find the fulness of the Trinity in one place is at the baptism of Jesus. All three of those known as the Synoptic Gospel writers include an appearance of all three persons of the Trinity as Jesus comes up out of the water: the Son in the body of Jesus, the Spirit in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father calling from heaven (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22).

However, we can go even further back to the earliest mention of at least two of the Trinity: Genesis 1:2 tells us that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” And, later in the creation story, the chronicler records God’s commanded creation of the human race in plural terms: “let *us* make mankind in *our* image” (Genesis 1:26 – emphasis added).

Jesus gives the disciples their commission to spread the good news across the world, the only time that he is recorded to have put together the Trinity in one sentence (Matthew 28:19), though some have speculated that this was a later addition made by scholars keen to emphasise the Trinity at the heart of the Christian faith. John’s gospel includes references to the three members of the Trinity in Jesus’ teaching on the Holy Spirit (John 14:26 and John 15:26), but these are in relation to the sending of the Spirit by the Father, rather than as part of the Godhead.

Paul also refers to the Holy Spirit as having been sent by the Father (Galatians 4:6), though his most famous reference to the Trinity has now been adopted as our frequently used prayer of Grace (2 Corinthians 13:14): “*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore, Amen.*” It is interesting to note (well, interesting to me at least) that here Paul doesn’t identify the Father as a distinct title, though he does so at many other times. Something for the theologians among you to chew over...

Moving beyond both the Bible and the later arguments and wrangling on defining a theology of the Trinity, we find ourselves drawn into the art world to continue our exploration this week. One of the most famous images of the Trinity is Rublev’s 15th Century icon, shown at the top of the “Thought”, which depicts three winged figures seated around a table looking like they’re waiting for the bill to arrive. Whatever interpretation we might want to attribute to the image, and the picture itself is an illustration of the visit of three “strangers” (or possibly angels) to Abraham and Sarah as we read in Genesis 18:1-15, Rublev certainly intended it as an illustration of the Trinity.

It is in this icon that we find the beauty of the relationship at the heart of the Trinity. The three figures representing the Father, Son and Spirit are almost identical, though their outfits are of different colours (with associated theological meanings). There is a strong “family resemblance”, though they are also distinct from one another, in the same way that the Trinity is One and also Three Persons.

But there is an additional resonance for us today when considering the Trinity through this picture. The scene is one of hospitality, with humanity invited into the relationship as well. Abraham and Sarah are the hosts for their honoured guests, who are welcome to sit at their table and eat their food. So too are we invited into the relationship of the Trinity, to join in with the feast of the kingdom, the “Divine Dance”[\[1\]](#) of Creator and Created.

There is an extravagance to the grace of God that allows us, mere us, into the eternal realm of kingdom relationships. This in itself is a startling statement, made even more mind-boggling when we think that the

invitation is for anyone and everyone. For those of us who have accepted the invitation, we take our place in the dance, our seat at the table, greeted at the door by the one who offers to wash our feet clean from the muck of life and to feed us the simple food of salvation. For those who aren't beside us at the table, it's only because they haven't yet said "yes", or don't realise that they've been asked the question.

Just as the Trinity is three-in-one in form, so too are these relationships three-fold. *Inwardly*, our relationship with ourselves is central - to see ourselves as God sees us and loves us, warts and all. But also we are not to be satisfied with those warts, but to come to him as our Healer - *upward* we look towards the one who forgives and freely gives abundant, sufficient, costly grace. And from there we look *outwards*, towards the world we think as beyond the table, suddenly finding that the table extends around the world and more people are being brought in to join the feast.

So, as we come to the end of our run of "Thought for the Week" articles, we reflect on where we have been, where we are and where we might be heading. These articles came into being at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the church building locked its doors to gathered worship on Sunday mornings. It was uncertain what form we might find for teaching and encouraging people in their exploration of the Christian faith, and we were yet to discover the varied delights of Zoom church.

Over the months, these articles have covered a broad range of ideas and themes, using a variety of creative styles, with a number of voices occasionally adding theirs to my own as we've sought to bring God's eternal truths to today's world in a (hopefully) entertaining and thought-provoking way. Sitting alongside the widely authored "Midweek Musings" these articles have mirrored the Bible readings for each week, as we developed our worship on Sunday mornings, occasionally able to meet in the building until another lockdown sent us back home again. Now we are more regularly, and hopefully more permanently, opening the church building on Sunday mornings, we're doing lots of work to make the whole building a welcoming, safe and worshipful place, so we start to look to the future. Taking with us the example of the Trinity in relationship, centred on God's love, grace, mercy and welcome, we look forward to meeting others who are responding to that invitation. As we make improvements to the building, so we pray that God would show us those who need to know that they have a place at his table. And make room for them.

Amen.

[1] For more, see "The Divine Dance" by Richard Rohr (Whitaker House, 2016); from both a British and Baptist perspective, see also "Participating in God" by Paul Fiddes (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000)

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