

Scripture Readings for Sunday June 16 2019

John 1:1-5,14 (NIV)

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 16:7-14;33 (NIV)

⁷ But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ about sin, because people do not believe in me; ¹⁰ about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; ¹¹ and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

¹² "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. ¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. ¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

³³ "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Sermon: "Three-in-One" and "One-in-Three"?

As you know, the Church's annual calendar begins with Advent, moves quickly through Christmas and Epiphany on toward Lent and Easter. Fifty days later we celebrate Pentecost and then there is a brief pause to take a breath and regain perspective with today, Trinity Sunday, before getting back into the weekly fray as we work up to Christ-the-King Sunday at the end of November. Last week we celebrated Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit in power to equip Christ's Church for ministry. A week or so prior to that, the Church celebrated Ascension Day, when Jesus mysteriously returns to the Father. Trinity Sunday is, then, an appropriate moment to consider the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and to reflect on the Christian understanding of the nature of God. Let's be honest, many people struggle with the Church's doctrine of the Trinity. "Three-in-One" and "One-in-Three" isn't

particularly logical! Consequently, if we're asked about it, we struggle to explain why we believe in the Trinity. And it *is* strange that the Church's orthodox doctrines and traditional creeds stress the Trinity, yet that word itself does *not* appear in the Bible. So today I thought I would at least *try* and explain *why* we believe in the mystery of the Trinity, and – perhaps *more* importantly – give some reasons *why* it matters and *what* difference it makes to our understanding of God. Let's begin with some historical context.

What is God like? And how would we know? For the Christian, the starting point is that God is the “God of the Bible.” But stating that is the beginning—not the end—of the matter. The God *of* the Bible is not simply to be equated with the God *portrayed* in the Bible. That's because Scripture contains a diverse range of metaphors for God; he is likened to a violent warrior, an almighty king, and a righteous judge, along with more comforting metaphors of a rock, a potter, a shepherd, a gardener, and a loving parent. All that can be confusing! Nevertheless, Christians agree that God's nature is *not* derived from studies of creation or philosophy¹ but based on the biblical authors' understanding of God and God's actions in history. That understanding was a journey of discovery and revelation, first by the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and their families, then by key leaders (such as Moses, Joshua, and Samuel), and later kings (like David and Solomon) and prophets (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). The Old Testament authors were, among other things, describing *their* understanding of what God is like and how God relates to the world.² What you may be surprised to know is that they did *not* conclude that God was omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and all those other *Greek* ideas that we often associate with God.³ No, Israel's basic understanding of God was in terms of a covenant, a binding promise of mutual relationship and commitment. God was described in *relational* terms, not as an abstract, distant Divine but the *personal* “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” I will come back to that later. For the *Christian*, however, God's supreme self-revelation to humankind was in the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Messiah, followed by the coming of the Spirit. Christians therefore rightly say: “If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.” Nevertheless, the response to the original question “What is God like?” is still more complicated.

Christians often forget that, in light of the resurrection, the early church had to formulate a response to the question, “*Who is Jesus?*” The gospel writers were explicitly addressing that question to their audiences. For example, Mark's very first verse proclaims “Jesus is the Messiah,” or God's special Anointed One.⁴ John's gospel, written decades later, begins by linking Jesus with the divine Word, who

¹ In medieval scholarship this resulted in the “god-of-the-philosophers,” in that the nature of God was pursued through the use of *reason*, as an academic exercise, and then compared with traditional church doctrines on God - which were regarded as the result, at least in part, of divine *revelation*. The role of reason and revelation continues to inform theology today.

² Moreover, it is fair to assume that they were *not* writing with the whole history of humanity in mind, but to their own specific audiences and contexts.

³ Add to that list immutability (unchangeable), impassivity (no negative emotions), and eternity (timeless). These abstract, absolute attributes emerged centuries later (2nd- 4th AD) with the syncretism between Christianity and Greek thought.

⁴ Mark 1:1. He also used the title “Son of God,” but this should *not* be seen in a *trinitarian* sense. Rather, as a multi-faceted title that had subtle meanings to both Jews and non-Jews that imply (at the very least) “highly-honoured by God.” Note that Mark begins his account with Jesus being “authorised” by God at his baptism; Mark 1:9-11. Matthew and Luke bring that authorisation forward in time with their birth narratives; John moves that time to before the dawn of creation!

was with God in the beginning and intimately involved in creation.⁵ It was *this* Word that was made flesh, says John, and who lived among us.⁶ Throughout John's gospel he also emphasises the close relationship Jesus had with the Father; I spoke about that three weeks ago.⁷ Jesus told his disciples, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me,"⁸ and earlier he said publicly, "I and the Father are one" and his opponents tried to kill him for blasphemy.⁹ In today's reading that intimate relationship between Jesus and God the Father is assumed, and Jesus makes the added connection to the Helper [or *paraclete* in Greek], the Spirit of truth who comes authorised from the Father to guide us into all truth.¹⁰ Such texts¹¹ provide the seeds for the doctrine of the Trinity, which was formally established some three centuries later. The "God of the Bible" does not, then, merely float off the pages of Scripture; the doctrine of God arises from deliberate theological reflection.¹²

But getting *to* the orthodox, trinitarian position was highly controversial – no surprise there! In part, that was because describing the relationship between the members of the Trinity requires *words*, and words have different connotations in different languages - Greek and Latin, in this case. As we struggle to articulate what we mean by "Three-in-One" and "One-in-Three," sometimes it is easier to say what the Trinity is *not*; God is *not* three separate, autonomous selves, or tri-theism. Moreover, Jesus is *not* subordinate to the Father, but co-equal.¹³ The same is true of the Holy Spirit. And God does *not* have three different modes of existence,¹⁴ Father, Son, and Spirit; God in Godself is genuinely *one* person.¹⁵ Part of the problem is that the word "person" creates tensions and confusion for us. We tend to associate the term with "individuality."¹⁶ However, for the early Christian writers, the word "person" was an expression of the nature of a human being *as seen in his or her words and actions*. Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on *the web of distinctive social relationships*, something that "individuality" does not imply.¹⁷

Words are evidently tricky; so let's try images! There have been numerous attempts at metaphors for the Trinity: water (ice, liquid, steam); family (father, mother, child); egg (yoke, white, shell); music

⁵ John 1:1-5.

⁶ John 1:14.

⁷ See John 14:15-29; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Helper-Is-Coming.pdf>

⁸ John 14:10-14, 20.

⁹ John 10:30; his critics understood the implications of that bold claim and tried to kill him for blasphemy, see 10:31-39. To a Jew, claiming Jesus was divine would be tantamount to blasphemy for: The LORD our God is *one* (see Deut 6:4; Mark 12:29).

¹⁰ John 16:13. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Helper-Is-Coming.pdf>

¹¹ See also: Phil 2:9–11; 1 Cor 8:4–6; Col 1:15–19; Heb 1:3; 2 Cor 13:13; and Matt 28:19.

¹² Theology continually systematizes that doctrine by the use of reason, based on biblical insights, and informed by the broad, historical, Christian tradition. All this is further shaped by our own contemporary context and experiences of God.

¹³ As we have seen, there are plenty of verses to support that view. However, Col 1:5 describes Jesus as the "*firstborn* over all creation." This caused Arius of Alexandria (ca. 250–336) to say that Jesus was *not* co-eternal with the Father. This Christological controversy was addressed, but not fully resolved, at the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.

¹⁴ This is *modalism*. There are two forms of modalism: *chronological* and *functional*. Chronological modalism has God appearing as Father, Son, or Spirit *sequentially* in history. This view is also referred to as Sabellianism, after Sabellius (early third century). Functional modalism holds that God functions in three different ways at the same moment in time.

¹⁵ Or, formally, "of the *same* essence/substance" (Gk. *homoousios*). See Chadwick, *Early Church*, 125–51.

¹⁶ "It is not that we need a *less* relational view of the triune God as an eternal communion of love; rather, *we need a less individualistic and more relational view of human personhood* as intimate interdependence and mutuality," Harold Wells.

¹⁷ See Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 200.

(source, score, sound); a three-cord rope or braid, a shamrock, etc.¹⁸ But all are found lacking to one degree of another, as they all tend toward those things that the Trinity is *not*! Even Augustine's trio of Lover, the Beloved, and the bond of love between them—the triplet corresponding to the Father, Son, and Spirit—has a hierarchy in mind, and the Spirit is the poor relation! That is the problem of visualisation.¹⁹

The Syrian monk, John of Damascus (ca. 676–749), introduced an influential term to describe the Trinity: *perichoresis*.²⁰ This Greek word means “reciprocal indwelling.” In other words: a dynamic community, and stresses the unity of the three persons as “beings-in-relationship,” or as a shared-consciousness with the mutual giving and receiving of love. As theologian Alister McGrath puts it: “The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two.”²¹ Rather than an emphasis on self-sufficiency, there is, then, *interdependence* within the Trinitarian life.²² Consequently, in the Trinity there is both differentiation *and* unity.²³ For example, the Trinity has been differentiated in their roles as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; yet helpful though that is, *all three* jointly share together those roles. Theologian Anthony Thiselton also points out: “The Trinity has immediate pastoral relevance because in God the self is *not an isolated self-centered being* but a *self-in-relation to others*.”²⁴

Speaking of *pastoral* relevance, let's now consider *why* it matters and *what* difference it makes to our understanding of God. Put a different way, and at the risk of being too functional, what are the *benefits* of believing in the Trinity? Let me give three important examples; there are others.

First, God for many people today is distant and remote. That is because the Holy Spirit's presence *in* the world has been ignored or forgotten and Jesus has been reduced to being merely a “good teacher” along side other religious leaders. That leaves God as Creator, someone *outside* the universe who is, perhaps, looking down on us “from a distance.”²⁵ Such a god quickly ceases to be *personal* and we have no grounds to call him “Father.” This view of God is referred to as deism and has grown in popularity over the last two or three centuries, following the Enlightenment and with the rise of modern science. When a person today says “I believe in a God,” they often have this deistic concept in mind. The doctrine of the Trinity emphatically rejects that notion. Christian belief in the Trinity shows that God - Father, Son and Spirit - is *intimately* involved and concerned about us and the world God created. This is supremely demonstrated in the incarnation, the divine word made human in Jesus the Messiah. If God seems remote to you, re-examine your understanding of God's nature.

¹⁸ Add to that list a self-conscious subject with the intertwined faculties of memory, understanding, and will.

¹⁹ There is the same problem in quantum mechanics; we can't *visualise* atoms from the equations that describe them!

²⁰ The word “choreography” is based on a similar word in Greek and hence the trinitarian metaphor of a divine *dance*.

²¹ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 241.

²² This unique unity of purpose, fellowship, and love within the divine communion counters the criticism of tritheism.

²³ “If the mystery of the Trinity is the template of all reality, what we have in the Trinitarian God is the perfect balance between union and differentiation, autonomy and mutuality, identity and community,” Richard Rohr.

²⁴ Thiselton, *Systematic Theology*, 36, his emphasis.

²⁵ “*From A Distance*” was a hit song written by Julie Gold and made popular by Bette Midler, Cliff Richard, and others.

Second, the Trinity stresses that *relationships* are vitally important, not just in this life, but in the life to come. God is *not* impersonal nor lacking in compassion and love; in contrast, the Trinity proclaims God is *relational*, a living, dynamic unity – and has been from all eternity.²⁶ As I said earlier, that *relational* aspect was appreciated by the Old Testament writers who often defined God as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” God is therefore *our* God, and we too *can* call him *Father* – just as Jesus called him by the intimate Aramaic word, *Abba*.²⁷ Moreover, we were made to commune with God, and when we reject that we cut ourselves off from our Maker, Redeemer, and Sustainer. As we read in the creation story: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”²⁸ This means that we must *not* buy-in to the cultural lie of autonomous individualism; we were made *for* relationship and our identity is shaped by *our* social connections - or the lack thereof. Expressing this another way, if the Trinity is likened to a divine *family*,²⁹ and we are made in the *image* of God, then we were also made for relationship. Our true humanity is meant to be lived within the context of a healthy, loving community, and in relation to God.³⁰ The church is to model that divine family in its corporate life as a light shining on a lampstand.³¹ This is both countercultural to a world that promotes self-centered individualism and is a beacon of hope to those who are lonely or who have experienced the fracture of their family.

Third, it is God as Trinity that affirms that God is essentially *self-giving* love and whose strength, therefore, embraces *vulnerability* because love is fragile by nature. The Creator’s love can be *rejected* by creatures because love requires freedom – it can’t be coerced. Sadly, many parents understand this point because of estrangement and dysfunction within their own families. Consequently, this also means God *suffers* with *his* creation. This is, of course, supremely demonstrated in the cross, where God was crucified. If the Trinity means “beings-in-relationship,” then Easter was not only the time Jesus experienced betrayal, rejection, torture, shame, and death, but these experiences were shared by the anguished Father who witnessed these acts perpetrated by his own creatures.³² Moreover, the life-giving Spirit, the divine breath of life, experienced Jesus breathe his last. An aloof God, one who is impervious to suffering, is of little comfort in a crisis. Only a God who knows our sufferings first hand is worthy of our worship.

In conclusion, the great theologian, Karl Barth, regarded the Trinity *not* as a puzzle that we are required to solve, but an *explanatory framework* which sets theology in *proper perspective* and from which we

²⁶ In Karl Rahner’s language, “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa.” What this means is that God *revealed* to us in *history* as Father (Creator), Son (Redeemer), and Holy Spirit (Sanctifier)—the *economic* Trinity—is truly who God is apart from creation, in other words God’s (timeless) essential nature—the *immanent* Trinity.

²⁷ See Rom 8:15-17.

²⁸ Gen 2:18. In Gen 1:26 we read “Let *us* make. . .”; this is *not* trinitarian but a reference to a royal court, a common Old Testament metaphor. However, the point in this image is that God *consults* with others before creating humankind.

²⁹ This notion is expanded in Moltmann’s “Social Trinity,” an important concept that counters deism and/or a purely unitary divine.

³⁰ If the Trinity is fundamentally a *communion*, a shared life of beings-in-relationship, then we too need to be in healthy relationships with God, each other, and creation - *shalom*. Communion, therefore, is what *being*—life itself—is all about.

³¹ Matt 5:14-16. Alternatively, this is an example of living out the “kingdom of God,” to use Luke’s language.

³² The *irony* is that God sent Jesus into the world to save it! See John 1:10-13; 3:16-21.

can explore practical solutions associated with the problems of the Christian faith,³³ as well as shape the Church's worship³⁴ and mission.³⁵ Now whether all this has shed light on the mysterious nature of the Trinity, only you can say! But let me end on this note. If you think about it for a moment, it is highly *appropriate* – even *necessary* – to have an element of mystery associated with God, else we have made God in our own image! Mystery, symbol, and story are important, even if they are not scientific. These things are certainly not something we should be embarrassed about! Let us pray.

Added information for interest: The Old Testament Hebrew *Shema* affirms the monotheism of Judaism; Jesus, like all good Jews, would have recited the Shema twice a day: “Hear, O Israel; The LORD our God is one [or alone].”³⁶ As Isaiah states of the LORD: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.”³⁷ This Creator God is beyond space and time [i.e., transcendent]; even so, there are also strong indications of God's presence [or immanence] within creation in the various Old Testament writers' usage of “spirit,” “wisdom,” and “word.” The spirit of God (literally, “breath” or “wind”) is the power by which God animates creation³⁸ and anoints special people, such as prophets and the coming Messiah.³⁹ We read in Proverbs that the wisdom of God also helped create and structure the world.⁴⁰ And the word/voice of God that we hear in Genesis 1 is powerful and effective; when God speaks you can be sure what God says will most definitely come to be.⁴¹ The New Testament assumes this Old Testament conception of God, but its writers adapt their understanding of God in the light of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of the wisdom⁴² and word of God, and the divine Spirit becomes personified as the Holy Spirit. Consequently, although theologians are quick to point out that the (eventual) doctrine of the Trinity does *not* cancel out Old Testament monotheism, it does, nevertheless, reinterpret or qualify that strict understanding of monotheism significantly. For the Christian, there is, then, one, true, Creator God, but this Creator God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together.

³³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 253.

³⁴ Speaking of worship; earlier we sung the Doxology - whose last line has: “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” If we really believe the Trinity is important, the lyrics in our hymns should reflect that. They should not just be about Jesus!

³⁵ The Church's *mission* is *trinitarian* not purely Christocentric. Prayer too is trinitarian; we pray “to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit.” (Added to that, the Spirit and Son are *both* intercessors on our behalf; Rom 8:26-27, 34.)

³⁶ Deut 6:4; Jesus recites the *Shema* in Mark 12:29. There is much revealed in a name: “*Elohim*” is the most common name for God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Its Semitic root “*El*” is in keeping with more general names for God and it can be qualified, such as *El Shaddai* meaning “God Almighty” (Gen 17:1). The personal, covenantal name for God is *Yahweh*, (or YHWH) and is typically translated as LORD in English Bibles. It was this name for God that was—and is—unspoken by pious Jews. This name was first given to Moses in the burning Bush incident (Exod 3:14). There God revealed himself as “I AM WHO I AM,” or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE,” so informing Moses of his faithfulness and presence from generation to generation.

³⁷ Isa 44:6b.

³⁸ Gen 2:7.

³⁹ See also Isa 42:1–3; Ezek 37:1–14.

⁴⁰ See also Prov 1:20–23; 9:1–6.

⁴¹ See also Ps 147:15–20; Isa 55:10–11. It is important to appreciate “the Word *became* flesh” (John 1:14) in this context.

⁴² 1 Cor 1:24,30; Col 2:2-3.