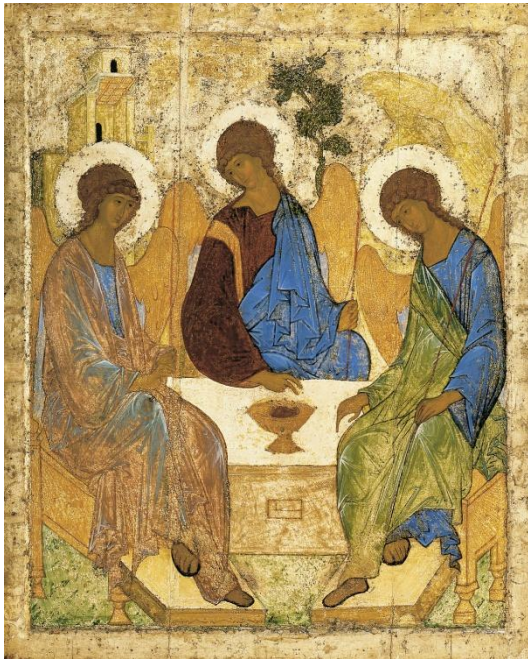


Making Sense of the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity



Almighty and everlasting God, you have given us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity and in the power of the divine majesty to worship the Unity: keep us steadfast in this faith, that we may evermore be defended from all adversities; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The Collect for Trinity Sunday

Every week we profess our faith in the Holy Trinity when we recite the Nicene Creed as part of our Eucharistic Liturgy: it is a way of confirming that we stay true to the understanding of the nature of God as it has been entrusted to us by the generations before us. The Creed itself was compiled in its current form in the 4th as a summary of the *Apostolic Teaching* going all the way back to the Early Church, and its fundamental *Trinitarian character* is already there in the way St Paul greets his own spiritual friends with a mutual blessing which we exchange even today, commending ourselves and each other into the *grace* of Jesus Christ, the *love* of God the Father, and the *communion* of the Holy Spirit. Note that this is a *prayer*; and note how it understands and interprets what the theology of the Creed formally describes as One God in Three Persons in terms which are fundamentally about how we all *relate* to each other – ‘grace’ and ‘love’ and ‘communion’ (or ‘fellowship’):

Brothers and sisters, put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

2 Corinthians 13.11-end

That is to say, the ‘Holy Trinity’ is not some kind of riddle which needs to be ‘explained’ or demonstrated. It is about God’s very nature as One *in*

whom relationship already exists, and through whom our own existence comes to fruition by means of our own ability to relate both to God and to each other. The capacity for relationship – for ‘love’ – is what holds everything together. It is the ultimate basis of meaning. The best ‘proof’ of the Holy Trinity would not be a matter of logic or clever thinking, but rather the way in which we who profess faith in the Trinity *relate* to each other. It is the same as Jesus’ ‘New Commandment’ to his disciples at the Last Supper – that we shall be *recognised* as his disciples by our *love for one another*, just as he has loved us (John 13.35). Where had that love come from? It comes from the *very nature of God* in the first place: this is what the Creed attests. One reason why so many people struggle to believe in the Holy Trinity (would ‘*trusting*’ in it be a better way to talk?) is because Christian relationships are *not* always creditable and good – although it is obvious that the defect here is not in God, but in our commitment to him, or perhaps our incomplete understanding of him.

But the early Christians believed also that the whole creation reflected something of the character of God as a Unified Trinity of Love. One of the most intriguing lines of thought which some early theologians explored was the relationship between our faith – the ‘doctrines’ we believe – and what they understood of mathematics and science. Think of a triangle, with its *three points* – particularly when compared with a line between two points or a square with its four points. Where the line is liable to bend under pressure, or the square collapse in on itself, the triangle is *fundamentally stable*, particularly if it is equilateral – as the Three Persons of God also are in relation to each other. Think about it as another way of envisaging the significance of the Trinity as something intrinsically *strong*. Or they imagined the isolation (or loneliness) of a *single* unit; the way in which *two* are quickly brought into *antagonism* against each other, while *three* create the perfect context for *conversation* and *friendship*. All of this is how our forebears tried to understand the nature of the Holy Trinity as a way to describe God accurately, and always only ever as *One God*; but whose nature is self-expressive and loving in its very basis.

It is as beautiful and eloquent an idea as we could imagine – and the beauty and the eloquence are as important to our understanding as its goodness and its truth. May you, too, be ever-blessed within the eternal and unending love of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.