



Sermon

Why the Trinity?

John 14:6-11,16-17, 1 Corinthians 12:2-6, Deuteronomy 6:1-6

Trinity Sunday, 30/5/2021

© 2021 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Can you imagine how perplexing it was for Jesus' disciples to make sense of who he was?

A special Rabbi – yes. But not like the other rabbis they encountered.

Actually he seemed to be a prophet – how amazing to be students of a prophet, the Word of the Lord had not been heard since Malachi some 400 years before. But what a prophet! His miraculous ministry seemed as powerful as Elijah's or Elisha's.

But then the things he said. Remember that time when he said, "It is written in the Law – but I say to you..."¹ Who would dare to talk like that? One like Moses perhaps...?

Could this be the Prophet Moses spoke of who would have a ministry like his?² God had said of Moses, that with other prophets he spoke to them in dreams, visions and riddles but with Moses, he spoke face to face as to a friend.³ Jesus declared he only said what the Father told him; he only did what he saw the Father doing.⁴

Then he claimed equality with God! Think of that debate in which Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am." The Pharisees knew it. That was why they wanted to kill him for blasphemy – which it would have been - unless it were true of course....

But then he was crucified and rose again to life. When they met with him after the resurrection, they worshipped him. First the women who had gone to the tomb then Thomas: "my Lord and my God!" But no God fearing Jew could worship any other than Almighty God.

What about the things he said of himself, of God, of the Holy Spirit? There are a number of instances, where Jesus assert he is one with the Father. Today's gospel reading is just one of them.

It starts with his declaring that he is truth personified: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." That means we have to take really seriously anything he declares to be so. "No one comes to the Father except through me." So it is clear that he is separate from the Father. Then when Philip asks to see the Father, Jesus responds,

¹ Six times in Matthew 5

² Deuteronomy 18:15

³ Numbers 12:8

⁴ John 5:19, 14:10,24

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. ... ¹⁰ ... I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me. The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me ...

So he is separate yet also mysteriously one with the Father. I cannot take the time to explore the many scriptures which underline this, but one has to conclude that Jesus is God. Yet he is distinct from the Father. How can this be?

It gets even more challenging when Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit, as he does in this reading and again through chapters 15 and 16. Verses 15-16 of this chapter read:

...I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever-- ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Another counsellor – the word another in Greek means another of the same sort, rather than a different type. Here he says the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and from the Son. In other texts it is clear that the Holy Spirit is also God.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, these three names are used together in many places. We see at Jesus' baptism the Father speaks from heaven while the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus – all three are active in the same scene simultaneously. At the Ascension, Jesus commands that baptism be in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Our Epistle reading is from the 1 Corinthians, which is an early document dated about 55AD, just 22 years after the resurrection, Here, Paul taught about not being led astray by occult powers of pagan idol worship, but rather moving in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He quite artlessly refers to God, the Lord and Spirit:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. ⁶

He is not making a point about trinity or God's nature, just referring to the three persons of God to whom he routinely relates. ⁷

There are a good number of other passages which relate speak of the three persons of the Godhead together – for example what we call the Grace which is a direct quote from the end of 2 Corinthians.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. ⁸

However, if we accept that there is God whom Jesus called Father, and that Jesus is also God and the Holy Spirit is God we have a problem because both the Old and New Testaments are very clear that is but one God.

The classic text is the Shema (Hebrew for 'hear'): "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." ⁹ So, God is one but we have Father, Son and Holy Spirit all apparently God and distinct from one another.

What we can see is that these statements can be made with excellent scriptural support:

⁵ Matthew 28:19

⁶ 1 Cor 12:4-6

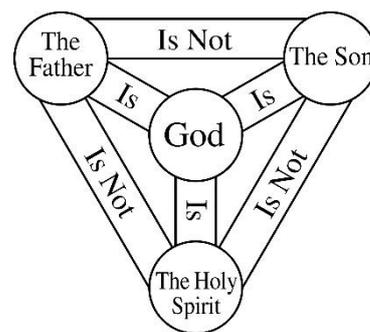
⁷ Dr Gordon Fee writes of this:

The Trinitarian implication in this set of sentences, the earliest of such texts in the NT are striking. As Barnett notes, "The Trinitarian formula is the more impressive because it seems to be artless and unconscious." It is not actually a Trinitarian construct per se; i.e., Paul's interest is not in the unity of the Persons of the Godhead: the relationships are not spoken to at all, nor does he say that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one. Nonetheless, passage like this are the 'stuff' of which the later theological constructs are correctly derived. ...

⁸ 2 Corinthians 13:14

⁹ Deuteronomy 6:4

- The Father is God;
- Jesus Christ is God,
- the Holy Spirit is God
- Each is fully God.
- Each is distinct from the others.
- There is one God.



This is apparently a dilemma or even a trilemma. How can we understand this?

What the Church Fathers came to after much thought and prayer is the doctrine of the Trinity. That God is one Being existing in three persons.

Even the *Shema* has a clue that Trinity is involved – it says literally: “Yahweh, our God, Yahweh one.” And the word for one, *‘ehad*, means a unity rather than an absolute one. One of the Lexicons comments, “It stresses unity while recognizing diversity within that oneness.”¹⁰ “It is used of one bunch of grapes¹¹, of husband and wife become one in marriage¹², of the curtains of the tabernacle being joined together into one and of people answering with one voice”¹³.

So, when we look back on this key passage from a New Testament viewpoint, we can see three words for God followed by the word meaning a unity – isn’t that interesting! Here in the great statement of faith spoken everyday by faithful Jews, is a hint of unity in diversity, of three In one.

Illustrations

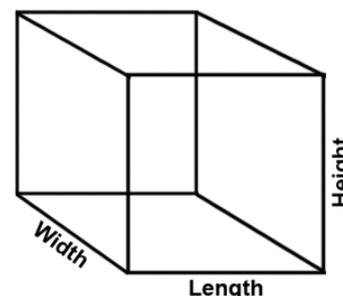
Once we have laid out the statements we find in Scripture as we try to understand how these can be mutually true it is hard for us to comprehend. But then it is hard for most of us to understand all sorts of everyday things: TV, Microwave, Cell Phone, Immune system of the body, what electricity really is, etc.

There are a number of illustrations which attempt to explain how three distinct things can be one as well. The three leafed clover, the three parts of an egg: shell, white and yolk; Red, green, blue light making white; water in three different forms of ice, fluid and steam, a person having different roles in life.

These are partial explanations but suggest other ideas which are not true. Most commonly the problem is modalism – the idea that God is really one person who acts in three different modes. Otherwise the illustrations suggest that the persons are each only part of God whereas we are forced to conclude from scripture that each is fully God in all attributes.

Quite an elegant illustrations is to consider a cube¹⁴ made of one substance. For the purpose of the illustration the cube represents the Trinity.

- There is only one cube.
- There are 3 dimensions.
- The dimensions are coequal. This is not just to say they are same length but that can’t say any of the dimensions is superior to the others.
- The dimensions are distinct from each other.
- The dimensions are consubstantial – they are made of the same stuff.
- If you point to or talk about any of the cube's dimensions you're actually referring to the cube.
- No dimension can exist apart from the others.



¹⁰ Harris, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (#61: *‘ehad*)

¹¹ Numbers 13:23

¹² Genesis 2:24

¹³ Exodus 24:3

¹⁴ https://www.reddit.com/r/Catholicism/comments/1msh6o/dimensions_of_cube_as_analogy_for_trinity_what/

- If you take away any dimension the cube ceases to be a cube.
- It is ludicrous to say that one dimension is 1/3 of the cube. In fact it cannot be said what percentage of the cube is one dimension, or two of the dimensions.
- The dimensions are as old as each other.
- At no point in time did one dimension exist by itself, then was followed by the other 2 dimensions. The dimensions formed a cube from the beginning.

That has some good points in favour of this illustration – the obvious weakness is that it is so static and impersonal – which is a poor representation of the one who is essentially LIFE! However, all our efforts fall down at some point. Basically, it is a mystery. We can define the parameters but cannot explain how it can be so - but that is true of many things less profound than the Godhead!