

January 22, 2012

One & Three: Father, Son, Spirit

John 14:1-27

I have multiple "personalities" ... but I am not certifiably insane (I don't think so, anyway!):

- To my children, I am a father;
- To my wife, I am a husband;
- To my parents, I am (still!) a child;
- To people in the church I am a pastor ...

People see and experience me differently (and may have a hard time thinking of me in one of the other identities I have!), but I know I am still the same, one, unified person - ME!

This is an (albeit) imperfect metaphor for the three-in-oneness, or Trinity of God: He is God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit. We experience and perceive Him in each of these "persons" - that's reality, even if we struggle to understand it!

The doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly spelled out in the Bible. There is no single verse of Scripture that reads, "*The one God is three persons.*" Instead, this doctrine is the product of a lengthy process of theological reflection that arose from the experience of the early Christians. The first followers of Jesus inherited from their Old Testament background the strict allegiance to the one God - the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deuteronomy 6:4): "*The LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength*" (6:4-5).

But they had also come to confess Jesus as the risen and exalted Lord, God. In addition, they were conscious of the ongoing presence of God within their community, the Holy Spirit. Christians throughout the ages share this experience of the early believers. Through their study of Scripture and their experience of God as Father, as Jesus, and as the Spirit, early Christians concluded that our one God - He is one! - reveals himself in three persons:

- Our wonderful Father, the Creator, Sustainer, and Lord of all;
- Jesus, our amazing Saviour, who redeems us breaking the power of sin and death;
- The Holy Spirit who is with us always - counseling, guiding, empowering, correcting, reminding, and inspiring.

We cannot "get our minds around" the mystery of the Trinity! How can God be one, yet reveal Himself in three persons? That's part of the reason that I - who was raised as a good heathen - do believe in this God: I cannot understand Him! If I, with my finite mind, could understand God, is He really worthy of my worship? As I become aware of how much greater God is than I and my inability to begin to comprehend His mysteries - I am led to worship Him, more and more! John Wesley once said, "*Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.*"

1. Trying to get our minds around it all ...

The Trinity defies a simple explanation - which is as it should be! There have been attempts to explain this truth through various analogies: for instance, as the one chemical H₂O can occur in three forms - ice, water, or steam - so also our one God is three persons. But like the river analogy, it falls short. Ice, water, and steam are simply three modes in which the same molecules could appear at any given time. Father, Son, and Spirit, in contrast, are not merely three forms in which God could appear; God always exists as all three all the time. As helpful as analogies can be, they can only take us so far. In the end, we cannot adequately visualize the doctrine of the Trinity. But we can say some of what it entails:

- **God is one:** we believe that the God whom we know through Jesus is the one God whom the Old Testament people called Yahweh. Indeed, there is no other God.
- **God is three:** yet this one God is three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one God actually is eternally three persons.
- **God is a diversity:** the one God is a diversity-within-unity. We experience the blessing of the Father, Son, and Spirit uniquely ... and yet they work together, in creation and redemption. One role of each may be summarized as: the Father is the originator; the Son is the revealer; and the Spirit is the completer.
- **God is a unity:** despite their varying functions, the three persons of the Trinity are all involved in every area of God's activity in the world. The Father creates the world, through the Son, by the divine Spirit. Jesus, the Son, redeems us and all creation, yet it is the Father's will empowered by the Spirit. Although the Spirit fills us today, the Father and Jesus empower us, guide us, and lead us, as well.

How are you doing? Not sure you understand it all yet? Good! It is a mystery! Vernon Grounds writes, *"Explain the Trinity? We can't even begin. We can only accept it - a mystery, disclosed in Scripture. It should be no surprise that the triune Being of God baffles our finite minds. We should be surprised, rather, if we could understand the nature of our Creator. He would be a two-bit deity, not the fathomless Source of all reality."*

2. So what?

a. **Perspective on the world.** Henri Nouwen asks a very practical question: *"How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred and violence, and not be destroyed by it?"* He goes on to talk about the Trinity - what he describes as a perfect "House of Love." One of the most fascinating aspects of the Trinity is that *"In the deepest mystery of his being, God is an intimate relationship, a fellowship, a community of love"* (Darrell Johnson). Somehow the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit get along absolutely perfectly! No problems. No conflict. Perfect harmony. They model the "house of love" we would all love to live in.

There is an old Russian icon (painting) of the Trinity. Of course it's just a painting. But the artist, Andrew Rublev was very intentional. In a world where fear, hatred and violence are everywhere (as in medieval Russia!), Rublev deliberately tried to create a picture of perfect

love, harmony, and peace.

In the centre is Jesus, pointing to the bread and cup, accepting his mission to the sacrificial lamb, human and divine. The Father, on the left, encourages the Son with a blessing gesture. The Spirit points to the rectangular opening which symbolizes the world - He will be the One who is with each of us, in the world. The world is rectangular reminding us that all people - from all four corners of the world - are welcome. It is located in the empty place at the table, to show us we are invited. Father, Son, and Spirit want us to join them. We are welcome to be part of this perfect "house of love" ...

The Trinity helps us keep things in perspective: we live in the world - we have no choice about that - but we are also invited to live in fellowship with God. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God and followers of Jesus ... but also residents of Canada and our community. There is a mystery about this. But there is a deeper mystery to the Trinity - there are things I cannot understand; they just are! We live in dynamic tension as those who desire to love God first and yet who live in this world: *"Here on earth," Jesus says, "you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33).

Henri Nouwen counsels, *"To live in the world without belonging to the world summarizes the essence of the spiritual life. The spiritual life keeps us aware that our true house is not the house of fear, in which the powers of hatred and violence rule, but the house of love, where God resides."* The Trinity helps us keep all this mystery in perspective.

b. Perspective on God. Have you ever memorized a passage of Scripture or a prayer? The Lord's Prayer? Psalm 23? In the Jewish tradition, people would memorize Deuteronomy 6:4 and say it over and over again so it became part of who they are - as commonplace as taking a breath. In the Eastern Orthodox church, the "Jesus prayer" has been used similarly: *"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."* The prayer is designed to be said over and over again, until it becomes part of the act of breathing, embedding a sense of the love of Jesus deep within the personality. Many people have found a prayer like this (or the Lord's Prayer) helpful: when they don't know what else to pray, allows them to focus on Jesus' presence, mercy, and love ...

It's a great to celebrate the heart of our good news - through Jesus we are forgiven. We can never afford to lose the daily and hourly sense of dependence on the free mercy and love of God, given to us through the extraordinary love and grace of Jesus. But that is not *ALL* the good news. Reflecting on God as the Trinity helps us to think bigger - to think about God bigger - to think about our lives in a bigger way ...

Tom Wright suggests expanding this prayer to be more Trinitarian:

*"Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth: Set up your kingdom in our midst.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God: Have mercy on me, a sinner.
Holy Spirit, breath of the living God: Renew me and all the world."*

- The opening echoes the Lord's Prayer itself, praying for the coming of His kingdom - with all our hopes and longings for justice and peace, for the poor to have their needs supplied, for joy and love, for righteousness to prevail. God's mission is to see His Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven ... this is good news (Mark 1:14-15).
- The familiar second line is, of course, the good news of life through Jesus.
- But we cannot stop there. Once we have been grasped afresh by the love of God in Jesus we must lift our eyes to the world around and see the new work that awaits us. We pray to the Spirit who alone can give life not only to us but to all the world. The good news is also that we have a purpose, shoring God's love ...

I encourage you to memorize many Scriptures - and this prayer. *"Repeat them again and again ... Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates"* (Deuteronomy 6:7-9). Then, if you are in a tight spot - or can't sleep - or thinking about nothing - you can draw upon those rich resources. What I like about *this* prayer is that it does challenge us to think BIG - about God, His mission, His love, and His call and commission to serve Him in the world.

c. perspective on our lives. When we think about the mystery of the Trinity, *"it is not an invitation to theological speculation about three persons in one God. Rather it recalls the experience of Jesus, our brother. He spoke of himself as a beloved son, as one who does not send himself but is sent on a mission, and as being joined by the Holy Spirit to the Father. We too, sisters and brothers of Jesus, are sent into this world with a purpose, we are God's beloved children, and we are joined to God by the Holy Spirit - we are temples of the Spirit. Already we are living in the life of the Trinity"* (Frank Doyle). We do live as dual citizens. We are residents of this community. But we are also God's beloved children, citizens of heaven, guests at His table. How does that change how we live?

Back to Nouwen's question: *"How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred and violence, and not be destroyed by it?"* We do this by being in the world but not belonging to it, by trying to live out the "house of love" modeled so perfectly by Father, Son, and Spirit in our homes, schools, workplaces, and community so that the Kingdom of God may come - at least in part - on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus affirmed that yes, indeed, *"The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength,' the second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"* (Mark 12:29-31). That love for God and neighbour is the "so what" of the Trinity. It's what the Trinity is all about. It is what the Kingdom of God looks like. May God - Father, Son, and Spirit - help us live it out that His Kingdom may come ...