

Trinity Sunday! Everybody's favourite day when shifty looking curates and Readers around the world valiantly ascend the pulpit with a bulging bag of props and declare with unblushing hubris, 'Today I'm going to explain the Trinity to you'. It's brave, yes, but they may as well say I'm now going to lick my elbow or eat this donut without licking my lips or levitate above the altar or locate Suella Braverman's sense of decency. As we don't have a curate to (shoulder the burden) and our Reader did this last year, it's defaulted to me to take you on a three in one trip today and I think instead of heading for the props bag we're going to go highbrow. So feel free to glaze over for the next eight or nine minutes, though, advanced warning there will be a written test before the end of the service.

To help us on our way this morning we're going to co-opt some help from some of the great thinkers of the past. We're starting with William of Ockham. That's the Ockham down by Wisley if you're a Surrey buff, though driving through its forest of no new houses NIMBY signs you'd never guess the place once produced one of the greatest of mediaeval thinkers. But it did and William of Ockham is famous for his razor. Not an actual shaving kit, but a philosophical principle he invented to be used in problem solving, not just metaphysical conundrums but any vexing issues. Ockham's razor goes like this:

Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem

Told you we were going highbrow. Just like Boris Johnson I haven't a clue what any Latin I quote means, so the NIV translation of Ockham's Razor might be some help an comes out as

'The simplest explanation is usually the best one'

Well, what we're trying to explain today is that God is one and God is three- Father, Son and Holy Spirit: a Trinity in unity. Easy to say, not quite so easy to explain not just to others but to ourselves. I think the search for the simplest explanation, alongside desperation, is what lies behind the various visual aids our straw man curate will optimistically lug into the pulpit today. So perhaps we *can* apply Ockham's razor to our Trinitarian knot?

The simplest explanation is usually the best one. And visualising things always makes it even easier. So let's have a look. St Patrick most famously used a piece of shamrock he'd plucked to explain the Trinity to early Irish Christians- it looks something like a clover leaf, but most of us don't live anywhere near a Shamrock patch so here are some more universal visual that are wheeled out to try to explain the inner nature of God.

Start at the beginning, a is for apple. This is what we will say: the Trinity is like this apple: the peel, the flesh and the pips- three things in one apple. Same sort of idea

with the egg- the shell, the white, the yolk. Three in one. Not bad. Anyone see a problem? Here it is.

Let's take our egg, break it into a bowl. We'll keep the shell to use to torment slugs in the garden. Now we'll separate the white and the yolk, make meringue with one and ice cream with the other. So. Now we have three things. Not three in one, but three separate things. If our egg was God we'd now have three gods not one. Same with the apple-peeled and cored it's no longer a unity. The great African theologian St Augustine suggested a similar take: wine, vinegar and oil. Three separate things, shake it up it's one thing- salad dressing. But it started out three things and given enough time will separate out into three things again.

If we're starting to feel we've run out of steam on this particular track, we might reach for another popular visual metaphor: H₂O- water. Water exists in three states- ice, liquid, steam. But it's always the same thing. Ice, H₂O, water, H₂O, steam H₂O. Three things, one thing. Simple.

Yep. And also wrong. Because it's not three different things but the same thing in three different states, like you asleep, you awake and you hungover. It's either ice or water or steam. But not all three at once.

So: memorable, yes. Simple, yes. And wrong.

We're going to have to leave William at the Ockham barbers and admit that though we would prefer the simplest explanation, and it's often the best one, life isn't always like that. Sometimes, like the Kingston one way system, it's just as complex as possible.

Having got ourselves into a conceptual cul-de-sac let's revisit what we are trying to explain. The official formula of the Trinity is Three persons, one substance, the 'persons' here being the English translation of the Greek *persona* which were the masks worn by actors. That might lead us to think, OK, so this Trinity thing is basically God wearing different hats. Today he's wearing the Father hat, next the Son with a beret, then a rather fetching bonnet for the Spirit. Except what about those occasions Scripture mentions when we can see all three persons of the Trinity are in the same picture, working at the same time- not independently but distinguishably. So for example, at the baptism of Jesus, the voice of the Father comes from heaven, the Spirit descends upon the Son. This is clearly not one person playing in the dressing up box and simultaneously wearing three hats.

Is it three separate divinities then? Again, no. 'I and the Father are one' says Jesus in the gospel of John.

Are you confused? Good. That means you're getting it.

To move us on (don't worry we're more than half way through now), we're going to elicit the help now of another smartypants of from the past, this time a fictitious one, Sherlock Holmes. In *The Sign of the Four* Arthur Conan Doyle has the famous sleuth slapping Dr Watson down saying,

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

We got rid of this explanation, we've got rid of that explanation, so what we're left with must surely be what we want?

Except what we're left with is not so much improbable as...incomprehensible? Nothing we can try, will satisfactorily explain. The premise is not incorrect: there is three, there is one. And there is no explanation. The sum looks like it should add up and yet it won't.

And now, finally, we've arrived at the right answer. The Trinity is something we can perceive but cannot understand, it's something we can get a vaguely workable idea of, by saying what it isn't. It's not that we're not smart enough to understand; it cannot be understood.

How can we understand God's Trinitarian nature? We cannot. As St John Chrysostom memorably as ever put it:

A comprehended God is no god.

But... here's the question: do we need to understand? Is it important that we understand God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, how that works?

Short answer is no, we do not need to understand how that works, which if you think about it, is handy, because we can't. But we do need to understand that it *does* work *and* it's very helpful to understand that we can't understand, to know the limits of what we can know.

When I'm preparing candidates for confirmation they usually start with some basic Christian doctrine. It can get quite complex surprisingly quickly and once its started, it will never stop- you can spend a lifetime studying our faith and only scratch the surface of Christian knowledge. So usually before I start the teaching I say, 'you don't need to know any of this stuff' to know Jesus. There are many ways to know God, and our intellect is one of them, but not the only one.

There are times when we will experience God's presence, times when we will be caught up in his eternal dance of love, times when our lives will be changed, transformed even. And there times when we can understand something of God with our intellects, however academically oriented or not they are. There are many ways to know God, and all of them are limited, all of them are partial. This is not a problem of our individual faith, or our collective faith. It is how it is, it cannot be any other way. As St Paul said

For now, we see in a mirror, dimly.

I think it's important to know that what we are seeing, what we can see is only ever a tiny part of the picture. And it's important to know that there will come a time when we will be granted the unknown ecstasy of the full picture. The time will come when, St Paul again:

We will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Our souls, made for God, year to known, but right now, we cannot fully know.

And also right now we *are* fully known.

Which is an amazing, wonderful thing to know.