

Questions for Trinity Sunday

If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are essentially one and the same, then is the difference simply verbal, describing different aspects or roles of a single being?

1. Is it the Holy Spirit that gives us access to God? Is this the primary role of the Holy Spirit?
2. If the Trinity is one entity why would God as himself sent himself to suffer to such an extent on earth.
3. If the Trinity is one entity but different forms why did God send his only son to suffer.
4. The Holy Spirit seems to be neglected in our daily devotions, it all centres on God and Jesus, how do we know that the Holy Spirit is guiding us.

Good questions. Saying first that God is infinitely beyond our understanding and that we can only barely grasp anything of Him at all, I think the best place to start is with the way the Church appears to have arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity, an apparent impossibility but actually absolutely necessary to Christian faith.

First of all, the unity of God is essential. There can only be one ultimate reality, ground of all being, origin and end of all that is, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all in all. Christians, Jews and Moslems believe that the essential unity of God is revealed to them by God Himself through the prophets and (in the case of the Christian revelation) by Jesus Himself. Secular philosophers who are prepared to accept that there is a God also tend to the conclusion that God is one. Even polytheistic religions tend to believe that all their gods are manifestations of one God or that there is one God at the top of the pile to Whom all the other gods are subsidiary and subservient. I don't claim to understand Buddhism, which some people regard as an atheist religion, but I think that for Buddhists, too, ultimate reality is a unity.

So the Christian Church, with its roots in the Bible and classical Graeco-Roman philosophy, tries to understand its experience of God in Jesus Christ in the context that God is essentially One.

God alone exists in Himself. Everything else which exists is God's creation; its existence is contingent on God. That includes the entire physical universe of energy and matter, stars, planets, light, dark matter, etc.. Even time and space are the creation of God. All living things, all plants and animals are His Creation. Everything depends on God for its origin and continued existence. He not only created all that is; He sustain everything. If God went off duty, even for a millisecond, everything except God would simply stop being. Angels, demons and any other spiritual beings there might be are also God's creation. God is the end of creation in both senses of the word – creation's completion, finish and purpose. Human beings are unique within the created order, being made in the image of God and inhabiting both the material and the spiritual realms. We are made of the dust of the ground, but God breathed into us the breath of life and we became living souls.

God therefore is absolutely apart from the creation. The very nature of His being is entirely different from the being of anything else. He is utterly, infinitely beyond. Moreover He embodies every perfection – Justice, Mercy, Goodness, Beauty, Purity, Wisdom, etc. Values exist in God. They are expressions of His Nature. The perfection of God further separates, even alienates, Him from the Creation which is imperfect. The Creation may be good, beautiful, etc., but only relatively to God's infinite perfections. This alienation is especially true of human beings who were created with free will and have consciously chosen to be less than God-like. God is love. His commandments to us are summarised in the twin commandment to love God and neighbour and we don't do either adequately and sometimes not at all.

Such is God and such Jesus tells us to address as *Father*, a title which Jews and Moslems regard as verging on the blasphemous. So Who is Jesus?

The faith and experience of the Church is that Jesus totally manifests the infinite Deity. This can only be so if He is Himself God. From early on, the Church worships Jesus, which would be blasphemy if He were not God. In order to reveal God to the world in His person, He must be God. Jesus therefore is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, the alpha and the omega, etc.. It is a question how much or how little these divine attributes attach to Him during the 33 years of His time bound, space bound life on earth – one which I can't answer – but it is essential to Christian faith that Jesus is God. If God is being in Himself and every created thing is contingent on God, Jesus is on the God side of that divide.

And yet Jesus talks to God as Father. He speaks of being sent by the Father and returning to the Father. We know from the above that there cannot be two Gods. There is only one God; there can only be one God. Yet there is Jesus and there is the Father. It is important to say that everything which God the Father is, so is God the Son. Otherwise the Son would not be a perfect revelation of the Father. The best way to look at the eternal being of the Father and the Son is as relationship. God is love. Father and Son are in the eternal relationship of love.

It is not sufficient, therefore, to think of Father, Son (and Holy Spirit) as different aspects or forms of the one God. There is more to it than that. They are three persons. They are not, however, three personalities. There is no sense in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit were not or are not a perfect unity of Will in Creation, Redemption and Sanctification. The Will of Jesus and the Will of the Father perfectly coincide in His Birth, Death and Resurrection. There is no conflict or bargaining between the members of the Trinity. Their purpose is one, as is their eternal plan for achieving that purpose. (I hope that goes some way towards answering 2&3 above).

From the moment of the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel and Mary's conception of the Son of God, Jesus is wholly human. The Annunciation of course occurs in time (like the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension) but the effects must be eternal as they are accomplished in and by the eternal Son of God. Just as Jesus must be God in every sense if the Christian religion is to make any sense at all, so Jesus must be human in every sense too. God really does actually experience for Himself what it is to be us. The Creator participates fully in the Creation. On His initiative God overcomes the essential alienation mentioned above between Creator and Created. The unlimited accepts the limitations of the created order. In so doing, He sets Creation free of those limitations. He overcomes the power of sin – that human rebellion against God's perfect law of love – which utterly alienates us from Him. It is our alienation from Him which is responsible for death. At-one-ment therefore brings life, eternal life in the eternal God. In Christ, God assumes our humanity (every aspect of our humanity) and what God assumes is made clean, purified, redeemed, sanctified - whatever biblical or classical analogy you choose. Christ fulfils every need – all the demands of the Law and the Prophets, all the needs of humanity, everything which Creation lacks. He becomes human so that we might become divine.

And this is not essentially alien, despite everything we said above. Adam was the son of God. Human beings are made in God's image. It is not "improper" that the Son of God becomes one of us or that, through His grace, we should become like Him.

Why can this redemption of the human race, this sanctification of creation, this atonement between the Creator and the created, only be effected through the suffering of the One Who in His one person embodies both the divine and the human nature? Why is it that *without shedding of blood there is no remission*? There are many precedents in the Old Testament which provide the

context for the Church's understanding of what Christ accomplished on the Cross. I cannot go into them all now or this short answer will turn out to be as long as the Old Testament itself. (Christians do need to know the Old Testament if they are to make sense of Jesus.) I think we can best understand briefly what God is doing in Christ by recognising the correspondence between eternal life and eternal love and between absolute love and an absolute willingness to sacrifice everything including oneself.

And so to the Holy Spirit. Again if the Spirit dwelling in us is God dwelling in us, then the Holy Spirit must be God in every aspect of God. The Spirit must have all the characteristics of God, which He can only do if He is in fact God. Likewise, if the Spirit working in the Church and the Spirit working in the world is God at work, the Spirit must be God. The Church worships the Spirit, which would be blasphemy if the Spirit were not God. Yet the Spirit clearly is not Jesus or the Father. Jesus refers to the Spirit as another comforter. (Jesus is the comforter = paraclete.) He promises to pray the Father that the Spirit will come. At His Baptism, Jesus stands in the River Jordan, the Father speaks to Him from Heaven and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. They are more distinct than aspects or forms of God. Yet it is the same thing when the Spirit dwells in us, Jesus dwells in us, the Father dwells in us – all promised in our Lord's words to His disciples at His Last Supper. Everything God is, the Spirit is. Everything God is, Jesus is. Everything God is, the Father is. The three persons are God in every respect, yet three persons (not three personalities) in an eternal relationship of love, an essential unity.

The reason usually given for the lesser prominence of references to the Spirit is that it is the Spirit's task to bear witness to the Father and the Son (as indeed Father and Son bear witness to one another) but there is no specific witness to the Spirit. Moreover, and more mundanely, it is much easier for us to understand Jesus the Man or the Father, Whose attributes are too easily pictured as infinitely perfect versions of our own paternal love, creativity, etc., than it is to envisage the Spirit.

Finally, I would add, that it is of the nature of love to flow outwards. Thus the eternal love which is the eternal relationship of the three eternal persons of the Trinity flows out to create, and, when the creation alienates itself through disobedience, God's love continues to flow out to redeem, and, as God's love flows out to sanctify creation, it thus unites reunites us with God and with one another in an eternity of love which surely is what we mean by eternal life.