

## God is three in one

### Matthew 28:18-20

As you read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation a story unfolds. To the casual reader it appears to be a sequence of sagas about people who had some dealings with God: it begins with the Patriarchs, and then tells the unfortunate story of Israel, before settling happily into the life of Jesus and ending with the spread of the first Christians. There is no doubt that those who would read the Bible for its human interest do so with pleasure and great profit, but they will have completely missed the point. For these stories are not an end in themselves, each one is a lens that brings sharply into focus some aspect of the character of the God who made the universe and who wants human beings to know who he is. When we read the Bible today God is revealing himself to people like you and me who would otherwise have remained in almost complete ignorance of him. The bible is a book about God.

As you would expect, God's portrait emerges gradually as we progress through these ancient writings. No one statement in the Bible is the whole truth about God. So when you read the scriptures you are collecting the insights and experiences of people who saw some facet of God's nature very clearly. What emerges is challenging to comprehend, but you would expect that, wouldn't you?

### God is One?

What if you are not interested in what God says in the Bible? Then you are on your own, but you need to know that the human quest for God has delivered some pretty appalling results if world religions are anything to go by. Almost every culture has developed mythologies in which packs of scheming self-centred gods and god-lets vie with one another for supremacy and attention. The correct name for this is *polytheism* and the personalities in a polytheistic system have hearts of stone and morals alley cats: they function like the people we read about in *Heat* magazine!

The God who reveals himself in the Bible is the exact opposite of this. For a start he is holy – that means his behaviour is pure and worthy of emulation: when we seek to be like him we become holy too: we stand out from the crowd because we are being pulled out of our naturally selfish mind-set. Here's an example: take a little thing like jealousy. In polytheism the god-lets are a jealous bunch – they don't think twice about destroying one-another and any human being that gets in the way of what they want. Their jealousy is a toxic cocktail of envy, frustration and spite. It is puzzling to some that, in the Bible, God reveals himself as a jealous God<sup>1</sup>, yet his jealousy is very different: “a praiseworthy zeal to preserve something infinitely precious”<sup>2</sup>. Think of the jealousy that drives some people to smash up the property of others just because they can't have the same: now compare that to the jealousy of a mother who sees her child drawn into destructive behaviour because her kid has fallen under the influence of his school friends. They are different aren't they? Seeking to be holy as God is

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<sup>1</sup> Read it, it is part of the ten commandments! Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 6:14

<sup>2</sup> Jim Packer's phrase from his brilliant book, *Knowing God*.

holy means that we deny ourselves the first kind of jealousy while nurturing the second kind. We become like him.

Not only is God holy, he insists that he is *one* God. Against the background of the man-centred and man-generated polytheism of the Egyptians, Greeks and everyone else, God revealed himself in the Bible's story as one God:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*<sup>3</sup>

#### **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**

But no one statement in the Bible is the whole truth about God. Not even this one. Work through the Old Testament and you are drawn into a mystery:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters... Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground." So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

#### **Genesis 1:1 & 26-27<sup>4</sup>**

"God is one", that is clear and unequivocal: but the Old Testament gives us a glimpse of the fact that the truth is more complex than we realise. Fast forward to the New Testament and the plot thickens.

*Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*

#### **Matthew 28:19-20**

When Jesus told his friends to take the gospel to the world he commanded them to baptize people as a sign that they were beginning a new life. It was important to him that this was done "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit". Take the lid off that short sentence and you find some surprising things:

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth pausing to reflect on the simple fact that the only three religions that teach monotheism are derived from the Biblical revelation. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all derive from the way God revealed himself to Abraham (hence the term *Abrahamic Religions*). Left to our own devices, human beings are polytheists, we seem to need special revelation to pull us away from that.

<sup>4</sup> To get the full picture, you need to trace this through the Old Testament. Here's a selection of references: Joshua 5:13-15: Isaiah 48:16: Ezekiel 36:25-27: Daniel 17:13-14: Malachi 3:1-2

First, the word *name* is singular. This is odd to say the least. Second, for the first time in history God (the Father) is put on a par with other beings - the Holy Spirit and the Son. It is as if we are being given a new name for God: “*FatherSonHolySpirit*”. Now it is possible to dismiss this as over-interpretation of the text – until you realise that this idea re-appears again and again in the New Testament:

*After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.*

**Matthew 3:16-17**

As Jesus is baptised you see the Father, the Son and the Spirit *in action*; it is most striking that, from this moment on, the New Testament writers talk about the actions of God in an entirely new way.<sup>5</sup> Here is another example:

*God the Father knew you and chose you long ago, and his Spirit has made you holy. As a result, you have obeyed him and have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ.*

**1 Peter 1:2**

The Father planned salvation, the Spirit applied it and the Son secured it: three persons in action. Needless to say, as the New Testament writings were studied by the first Christians they stirred up a lot of discussion! The churches and their leaders knew that God was one, yet they were also convinced that Jesus was divine. It was also quite clear that the Holy Spirit could not be reduced to the ranks of mere angels or other spirits, He was divine too! The problem for them was... how do you put all this into words?

The problem was solved by a clever North African called Tertullian (AD 160 to 225). Someone has worked out that this North African Christian invented 509 new nouns, 284 new adjectives and 161 new verbs in the Latin language. As Christians worshipped Christ and reflected on the Scriptures one of his words grew to be recognised by the churches as the best expression to capture what the Bible tells us about this mysterious multi-person God: *Trinity* (Latin – *Trinitas*).

No-one ever tried to foist concept of the Trinity onto the Church, and no emperor ever forced Christian leaders to accept the idea. The first Christians felt their way towards it gradually, as their understanding of God grew as they studied the scriptures.

*The doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as the outcome of a process of sustained critical reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in scripture, and continued in Christian experience.*

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<sup>5</sup> This is the norm through out the whole New Testament: check these references one by one to get the feel of this new language: Acts 16:6-7: 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: 2 Corinthians 13:13: Galatians 4:6: Ephesians 2:20-22 & 4:4-6: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14: Titus 3:4-6

*Scripture bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in Trinitarian manner.*

**Alistair McGrath<sup>6</sup>**

You will struggle to find a proof-text for the doctrine of the Trinity, but you will struggle to understand the Bible properly without it: the idea is woven into the fabric of the Bible the way that tartan is woven into the fabric of a kilt: you may not see it through a magnifying glass but when you stand back and look at the whole it is unmistakable.

God has revealed this aspect of his nature through activities amongst human beings. Each person of the Trinity is, in every sense, God. Yet each person is distinct and unique: one God in three persons. You see this best in the ‘pattern of divine activity’ – the way that God works in human history:

*God the Father uncreated, uncontained, invisible, one God, creator of the universe. And the Word of God, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who became human among humans, to destroy death, bring life and achieve fellowship between God and humanity. And the Holy Spirit who was poured out in a new way on our humanity to make us new throughout the world in the sight of God.*

**Ireneus of Lyons (AD 130 to 200)**

We are now well beyond the limits of human comprehension. God is three persons in one being.

### **The meaning of the Trinity**

Here is a selection of verses from John’s gospel. As we reflect on these I hope that some wonderful new things will emerge, and some old things to take on a new shine!

### **John 14:20-21 & 15:4 & 9-10 & 17:1 & 22-23**

At first reading these verses may seem impenetrable. They emphasise the intimacy that exists between the Father and the Son, yet they seem to be saying that a similar depth of intimacy can exist between a Christian and the Lord or even between Christians generally. If you thought that, you got the right impression: the relationships within the Trinity are our model for all relationships.

As the first Christians tried to communicate what Jesus was talking about here someone invented another word that caught on – *perichoreisis* – to describe the depth of intimacy between the members of the Trinity. It is an incredible idea – and I could give you the dictionary definition but it wouldn’t help!<sup>7</sup> Instead here is a short section of the novel, Captain Corelli’s Mandolin which captures the idea nicely:

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<sup>6</sup> Introduction to Christian Theology, p 249

<sup>7</sup> “Mutual indwelling” or “mutual penetration”, according to McGrath, Op. Cit

*Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion... That is just being 'in love', which any fool can do. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident. Your mother and I had it, we had roots that grew towards each other underground, and when all the pretty blossom had fallen from our branches we found that we were one tree not two."*

***Captain Corellis Mandolin (Louis de Berniers)***

Think of the roots winding around each other, impossible to separate, one tree growing into the other. That is perichoresis – the intimacy that exists between the persons of the trinity *and* the intimacy that could exist between you and your God. This is what *abiding in him* really means – him in you and you in him – your roots intertwined and your life shared.

But it is more than this. The Trinity is the inspiration behind all human relationships. God is a community of persons and that means, if you are made in the image of God, you were made for community too. Human life is at its richest – its most spiritual – when our roots intertwine like this. That is why it pleases God when we sit down together and enjoy one-another, when we invest time in our kids or in our family. God is delighted when we nurture relationships like this – it is, quite literally, what we were built for.

The Trinity is a community who are always giving of themselves, the Father is always saying, “Isn't my Son amazing!” The Son's always saying, “Look at the Father – everything I do is inspired by him!” The Spirit is always saying, “Look at Jesus... look at Jesus!” Now imagine if our community were inspired by the Trinity: everyone building others up rather than tearing them down. This is what the Trinity means in practice.

And here's an amazing thing. The word is a compound made up of two Greek words: *peri* meaning *around* and *choreo* meaning *dance* – whoever dreamed up this word imagined the Trinity were dancing with one another and inviting us to join in the fun, to enjoy the intimacy of dancing with the Godhead! Enough Greek already! God's dream is that the intimate love which lies at the heart of the Trinity should be shared with us and that we should share it with one another.

Are you up for that? Would you like to re-learn everything in the light of the Trinity?

One final thought. God is one and the three persons of the godhead work somewhat differently to bring about our salvation. The Father conceived the plan, the Son came and lived among us and the Holy Spirit actually kick-starts our hearts into spiritual action. God's whole being is involved in securing our salvation: so it is very appropriate that, when we are baptized we do so in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So here's a question, why won't some of us acknowledge this by actually being baptized? When God's whole being was bent to achieve our salvation, why are we so half hearted as to refuse to acknowledge and glorify him in the way that he has asked?

For some of us – this is a question that requires a serious answer!