

**The Holy Trinity (YearA ): to be studied in RE or geometry lessons?**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Exodus 34:4-6+8-9: Moses calls God “tenderness+compassion”**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13: Paul gives us the “Grace” prayer;**  
**Gospel: John 3:16-18: Jesus came, not to condemn, but to save.**

As students, we felt the Holy Trinity to be one of the hardest & (I may shock you!) most boring bits of the syllabus. We found the complexity of God being three and one at the same time (like a triangle in school geometry) very odd: so much so, that some questioned the purpose of much of the teaching. I have learned better since those late-teenage days in stuffy Ushaw class-rooms in the 1960's! The Church spent its first centuries clarifying the doctrine of the Trinity, then it turned to the problem of two natures of Jesus – God and man.

Relax! I do not intend to rehash lecture-notes & essays of 55+ years ago. However, the Holy Trinity is the most basic belief we have in our religion. The Old Testament showed how people came to understand gradually that there was only one God, so that by Jesus' time, all Jews accepted mono-theism ('one-god-ness'). Later, the New Testament revealed Jesus as being the "Son" of this one God, then the Holy Spirit being sent into the world by the "Father" and the "Son". I put the words in inverted commas to show that when we say "Father" and "Son" here, we cannot mean exactly the same as when we talk about the physical relation of fathers & sons in our families. God is not the same as us, so ordinary language cannot be used about God literally: it is mainly symbolic. It falls far short of reality, but it is the best we have towards understanding God.

Is it worth trying? Yes, I am sure of it, because it is the basis of what makes us Christian. This Sunday's first reading, from Exodus 34, shows us Moses, having his awesome divine vision, addressing God: "Lord, Lord, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness". In the second reading, St Paul ends his 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians with the famous "Grace" prayer: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." In the gospel (John 3:16-18), the writer quotes Jesus saying about himself: "God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but so that through him, the world might be saved."

Those three pieces sum up well our faith – and hope for the future. God is not like us – utterly different, in both the 'scary' and comforting senses. The experience of Moses and the Israelites showed an overpowering force that rescued them from slavery & genocide in Egypt, but also punished them (by the

harsh standards then accepted in their culture) for their faults. This went on throughout the history of the Old Testament. For St Paul, Jesus offered a new revelation of God as “Father” – forgiving, reconciling and offering us eternal life with his risen Son. St John’s gospel, written (or at least inspired) by the youngest apostle about 70 years after Jesus lived on earth, offers a long-term view of what Jesus meant to human salvation. The bit I quoted from this Sunday’s piece shows that. The purpose of our faith in Jesus is to offer hope, salvation and the happiness these can bring.

If we feel we belong in a community (family, friendship group, parish, the whole Church, etc), it is because the New Testament shows God to be “itself” a community, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not three separate gods, but a sort of “family” (careful – not exactly like our families here!) of three “persons”, who love each other, have existed from all eternity, and who act towards us humans in common. The Jesus who walked on earth is the eternal “Word” (or “Wisdom”, in the Old Testament) of God the Father; He became flesh, without ceasing to be God. All this was done by the power of the Spirit, who is seen as the love between Father and Son. It is interesting (and important) that early Christian writers saw the family life of God – the Holy Trinity – as feminine. In classical languages, “Trinity” was a feminine word – in Latin, “Holy Trinity, one God” was written as *Sancta Trinitas, unus Deus*.

My student memories apart, the Holy Trinity is at the heart of what we believe about the supernatural world. It is not some weird spook (as in that daft USA children’s TV show *Buffy the Vampire-slayer!*), nor a dead bit of ancient classical study. What we believe-in is a dynamic force, always creating, always influencing, and always loving. Because God is a sort of family of love within him/her/it/self, this love is shared with us in our church communities and in our personal faith. Difficult times have always happened; they can test our patience and faith, but the Holy Trinity is not a distant force, uninvolved with our problems. Its second person, Jesus, the Word made flesh, came to share our sufferings, and is still with us now. If you want a model (however imperfect the comparison) of God’s love within himself, and outwards towards us, look at a loving family near to you – how they behave among themselves, and relate to people outside their house. We humans are in God’s image and likeness, and this means that God’s own family life - the Trinity - is reflected (however faintly) in the homes of most of you who are reading this. *Fr Jim Dunne.*