

## **Trinity Sunday, Year B**

Isaiah 6.1-8, Romans 8.12-17, John 3.1-17

Well, here we are on Trinity Sunday, the one day in the church calendar when we focus on a Christian doctrine rather than on a particular Bible passage or character. And that despite the fact that the word “trinity” is found nowhere in the Bible!

Trinity is a difficult concept to grasp in the three dimensional physical world in which we live. Three persons, but just one Triune God. Triune being a word that is made up of two elements – three, tri, and one, one.

Do you see the Trinity in this way, as one God, one person, one entity, or three individual persons? I think this is important. Viewing God as Trinity rather than as three individuals gives us a more rounded understanding of the depths of our faith – and, to be fair, a more challenging concept!

It is a question that the church fathers considered and debated over the early centuries of our faith resulting in the establishment of the Nicene Creed in the 4th century which aims to state that each is God.

Twentieth century theologian Karl Rahner wrote that Christians are, in their everyday practical lives, almost mere “monotheists”. In other words, for all practical purposes they – and maybe we – believe in one God only, just one of the three.

Ask yourself, are you one? Before you dismiss the question take a moment to think: are you a one-of-the-Trinity-only kind of person? Which Trinity member do you think of when you think of God? Which member of the Trinity do you most relate to? Is it the same one? And which one of the Trinity, if there is one, do you feel is the most unrelatable? Is this the same one too?!

Our Epistle and Gospel today feature all three aspects of the Trinity, God the Father, Jesus, God the Son and the Holy Spirit of God, all in the context of eternal life.

The key verse in our gospel is John 3:16, probably the most famous verse in the New Testament. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

We often use this verse to explain how to become a Christian: believe in Jesus, believe in his death on the cross for forgiveness of sins and access eternal life.

And that's right. But our gospel passage is so much fuller than this. Jesus shows us the choreography of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all to give us eternal life.

It is the love of God in God as Father that drives him to send the Son to serve and to die; it is the love of God in God as Son that leads him to "*give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45) and it is the love of God as God Holy Spirit that chooses to indwell and transform our sinful nature into his holy nature. It is one triune God working as one to give us eternal life.

Once it was accepted that God is Trinity people started to think about what that means and how to explain it. And a broader more comprehensive way of understanding and describing the Triune God emerged.

To express this the church fathers and theologians used a Greek word to depict this intimate relationship within the Trinity, the word *perichoresis*, meaning to go around or to rotate. It is intended to represent the Triune God as one where each member is independent but, at the same time an integral part of the other two.

It is an idea that Jesus expresses when, speaking about the coming of Holy Spirit (John 14:20), he says "*On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*" We would know because Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, would fill us with Christ's life and draw our life into his life which is in the Father.

But this is still a difficult concept to get hold of. I take *perichoresis* as describing Trinity constantly mingling and revolving around one another within the love that is God and binds it together into the one unity, Triune God.

On your seats, or given to you when you came in, should be a colourful card with two images on it and the word PERICHORESIS. The images are artists' attempt to depict this idea, the larger image perhaps doing so more fully but lacks a certain something - movement.



But the smaller, simpler image<sup>i</sup> shows, perhaps surprisingly, a dancing Triune God. This arises from the awareness that the *choresis* part of *perichoresis* is a word from which we get our word choreography. So *perichoresis* can be reimagined as the dancing circle of the Trinity.



And why not? Interpreting *perichoresis* as a dance of joyful love expressing the Trinity is highly appropriate. It signifies the joy inherent within the Trinity (John 15:10-11) and the nature of God expressed in Zephaniah 3:17 where we read *The Lord your God in your midst... will rejoice over you with gladness,... He will rejoice over you with singing.* And there is something in the original word translated rejoice over that suggests that God is spinning in delight – over us!

But the important thing about this image of the Trinity, and the reason that I draw it to our attention, is that we are invited to join the dance – yes we! Peter writes in his second letter (2 Peter 1:4) *God has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature.*

The wonderfully named author Rankin Wilbourne, in his book 'Union with Christ', interprets partakers of divine nature as "our participation in God's own triune life." We are invited to join in the love dance of the Trinity.

Paul shows us in today's epistle how we can do that. The Spirit of God, God's own Spirit, Holy Spirit, himself can take our hand and lead us into the dance. He has already brought about our rebirth and now he draws us into the perichoresis of the Triune God. Holy

Spirit himself dances with us enabling us to overcome our sinful nature and live the holy life of God. He leads us away from the fear of God that distances us from him into a dance in the loving arms of Father. And we joyfully dance with Jesus as we anticipate a shared inheritance from God.

The Christian life itself becomes a dance of and with the Trinity.

We sometimes sing the song “Lord of the dance” but perichoresis is a different dance. It is not a dance where we follow the leader like following the Pied Piper but something more intimate, more interrelational.

If you google images of *perichoresis* you will find one or two that depict more than three people dancing together. The extras are those who have chosen to follow the leading of Holy Spirit and become participants in God’s own triune life. They are actively joyfully dancing together with Trinity. We too can choose to dance, to participate, or not to dance.

If we choose to dance then, just like Strictly come Dancing, it will require commitment and effort but dancing will bring us into a joyful lightness of step in fellowship and intimacy with Triune God.

Will you, will I, choose to participate in *perichoresis*? Take a moment to ponder for a moment on what it would take for you to be led by the Spirit of God. Could you perhaps draw yourself into one of the images on the card? Amen

*Chris Shaw*, 30 May 2021

### **Romans 8:12-17**

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness[c] with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

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<sup>i</sup> After the service people commented on how their immediate thought about the smaller image is that it is a heart depicting that God is love.