

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Trinity Sunday

15 June 2025

“Trinity and Salvation”

Readings: Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5: 1-5; John 16: 12-15.

The Idea of Trinity

*“And the Catholic Faith is this:
That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.
For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son:
and another of the Holy Ghost.
But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,
is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.”*

- Athanasian Creed

This is the beginning of the Athanasian Creed, a long and ponderous statement on the nature of the Trinity. It is later than the Nicene Creed that we recite in the Eucharist, but perhaps appropriate for Trinity Sunday as it goes to great lengths to describe the Trinity as ‘three in unity’.

The idea of Trinity is not obvious in the scriptures but rather has developed out of the life of the church. Nevertheless, Trinity is implied in the scriptures; beginning with the description of the Spirit ‘moving over the waters at creation’, to the messianic prophecies in Isaiah, and on to Jesus’ descriptions of God as ‘Father’, the centrality of ‘the Word’ in the prologue of John’s Gospel, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Trinity is part of the ‘tradition’ of the church – what I like to call our ‘collected memory’. The idea developed in the early church as a means to understand who God is – and especially the nature of Christ. It was not a straightforward process; the leaders of the church contemplated the question, what came to be known as heresies were proposed and countered, church councils were held, there was robust debate and on occasions violence. It was not until the fourth century that the theology of Trinity was settled and came to be expressed in what we know as the Nicene Creed.

Since then the idea of Trinity has become an enduring statement of Christian orthodoxy down through the centuries, and theologians still grapple with it seeking to give it a freshness for our own times.

The Problem of Trinity

The theological problem with God is that, by definition, God is beyond human understanding. What we have is the revelation of God in the Bible, and in the tradition of theological thought, and in the natural world (including humanity); but God is greater than this and human knowledge is always limited. To be sure, the doctrine of Trinity is like a theory that tries to explain a multifaceted reality.

For example, I remember a lecturer in economic theory telling the class that economic models are always only approximations of reality and never reality itself. The world is too complex for an economic model to encompass all that may contribute to economic activity. It was sage advice in a world that was all too willing to put its faith in the invisible hand of politico-economics, sometimes with disastrous results.

Provisionally of knowledge is also part of scientific orthodoxy. A theory stands until it is proven wrong and a better explanation comes along. Thus Newtonian physics gave way to Einstein and the theory of relativity, and then on to quantum mechanics. Of course, science is an activity that attempts to be objective in its examination of the natural world, but there are other ways of understanding the nature of things.

The problem with Trinity is that theologians try to be objective in their descriptions of Trinity, but the concept is based on subjective human experience. We have come to an understanding of God through several millennia of experiences that have been distilled into an understanding of God as creator of the world, present in humanity, and one who seeks to transform our lives – in short: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Part of the mystery of Trinity is that the idea is not only about God, but also about humanity. The fact that Trinity is thought about in personal terms such as Father, Son, and Spirit transports God from the far-off heavens to our daily lives. This is a God of relationships; indeed, the Trinitarian God's very 'being' is relationship itself.

God is therefore close to us, God is within and around us, God was fully present to humanity in Jesus, and God remains fully present to us through the Spirit of Christ that lives within us. In this way we become Christ to the world today...but I am getting ahead of myself!

Brokenness and Redemption

It is tempting for us to think that we (the collective human we), the we with all our knowledge, the we with the capacity to bend nature to our will, the we that can build high into the skies and travel in space, that this 'we' also has the capacity to think 'we' are God – or at least that a God of our creation who conforms to our expectations and justifies our actions. Since creation until now, humanity has often sinned by making itself the centre of God's story and have God look and sound like us.

The creation story tells of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of knowledge of good and evil and their eyes being opened to the possibility of choice – a Godlike quality that brings a capacity to act in one's own interests, or the interests of one's tribe at the expense of others – and so followed the story of the first murder as Cain killed Abel.

With the knowledge of good and evil came brokenness. The Godlike qualities of choice and power over others did not bring goodness, or justice, or peace, but rather brought death. It is a cautionary tale for our own times, seen in the detestable enormities of the current political sphere aided and abetted by the rent-seeking lobbyists and clingy religious groups that support them.

The story of the Trinitarian God is one that seeks to return humanity (broken by sin and faithlessness) to the garden where both the fruits of 'knowledge' and 'life' are available so that people might become what God intended them to be.

Two Ways to Live

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans contains the central point of his larger discourse on 'justification by faith'. It is the passage that motivated the great reformers, such as Martin Luther, to turn the church on its head by teaching that salvation comes because of what God does for us not because of what we do for God.

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand;" (Romans 5: 1-2a)

Paul wrote about God's redeeming activity to bring humanity back to what it was meant to be, which is to live in peace with God and one another. This is God the creator's action; present in Jesus who lived, died, and rose as both a sign of God's love and the redemption available to each person through faith; and the response is to believe and receive the Holy Spirit into one's heart.

The consequences of returning to God are threefold; first is an experience of God's grace or unconditional love; second is peace and harmony with God, each other, and nature; and third is being welcomed into a new community of life and love. This is the choice that God offers us – justification by faith.

As an aside; 'justification' is the action of demonstrating something to be right or realistic. Theologically, it has two positions. First is a legal one about being 'right before the law', and second is a relational understanding of being 'right with God and each other'. The first tends to be individualistic and the second communal. St Paul argued that we cannot be justified under the law because all have sinned and fallen short of what God requires, so we must turn to God through a relationship of faith.

I had though about calling this sermon ‘*two ways to live*’ but realised that the phrase had already been used in another place - and there is some baggage that goes with it. Nevertheless, the actions of the Trinitarian God toward us does require a response, because it can be life changing:

“And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5: 3-5)

The result of turning to God can be a life of harmonious relationships with God and each other. It also leads to a life lived without bitterness or anger that is more interested in the welfare of others rather than trying to control them. The ‘character’ that St Paul wrote about was the capacity to live with quiet assurance and grace rather than pig-headedness and arrogance. Living a life of faith and grace therefore brings joy and hope.

Sacrament to the World

In the light of this, how are we to live? Jesus demonstrated in himself the presence and saving power of God. As he farewelled his disciples near the end of his earthly ministry he told them that profound challenges lay ahead but God would not abandon them. Instead, the Spirit that guided and empowered Jesus would be given to his followers, and they would become his ongoing presence in the world. We are the inheritors of this unfolding drama of God’s presence in the world.

*On the night he was betrayed Jesus took bread;
and when he had given you thanks
he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying,
‘Take, eat. This is my body given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me.’*

Jesus gave his life to break the power of sin and brokenness and thereby draw us back to God. As we celebrate his life, death and resurrection in the Eucharist we are invited to draw close to him and receive bread and wine as flesh and blood so that the life of Christ might be present in us. Through this the Holy Spirit transforms us so that we may be the people that God wants us to be.

We (the church) are called to go out and be a sacrament to the world; which is to be the living presence of Christ to others.