

Exodus 34.1-8; Matthew 28.16-20

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“Firmly I believe and truly, God is Three and God is One”, John Henry Newman wrote, in *The Dream of Gerontius*, as the poetic character prepares himself for death.

Firmly I believe? Truly?

The poetic statement may be beautiful, but how many of us can honestly, unshrinkingly state that we firmly and truly believe that God is three persons, one god, without question, hesitation, or purposeful thought. I believe in the one-God-in-three-persons, certainly, but not without quite a bit of mental wrestling. After all, the concept that the Divine being is one-in-three does have its moments where it rather boggles the mind.

The concept of God as one being, three persons is, in some ways, a theological challenge, and over the years many illustrations have been developed to attempt to explain a concept so complex it took the early church four centuries of debate before it was satisfied (although, it is appropriate that we let our Eastern Orthodox friends remind us that the Church has never come to a single consensus about the nature and operation of the Triune God).

Illustrations of the concept of the Trinity often seem to try to take a simple, everyday item, in the hope that this will make the complicated nature of the Divine easier to comprehend. You might have heard, at one time or another:

The Trinity is like the three states of H₂O, Ice, Water and vapour...

The Trinity is like an apple: the core, the flesh and the skin...

The Trinity is like a three-lobed clover: distinct sections, but still one leaf...

The Trinity is like an egg...

The danger of many of the analogues we use to describe or explain the concept of the Holy Trinity is that most of them only explain one aspect of the nature of the Trinity, and usually at the expense of another integral part.

Worse than this, most of them begin, ‘The Trinity is *like*...’

For, the Trinity is **not** *like* anything.

The Trinity is mysterious, and unique. Because the Trinity: one God in three persons, is not an *object*: it is not something material, and definable, which can be circumscribed and boxed (*here* is the Trinity, *that*, over there, is not the Trinity).

Rather, The Trinity is a relationship. And, as those of you who are (or have been) married, or have had long-term relationships, know: relationships are inexplicable, mysterious things (which, often, to outsiders seem to make no sense at all).

In hoping, trusting and believing in a God who is, in the mystery of relationship, one, yet three, we place our faith in a being which exists in, and for relationship: a relationship of dynamism and power.

Often, in describing the nature of this relationship between the persons of the Trinity, we instinctively try to separate out the three persons into specific roles, agencies, or actions. Utilising the traditional labels, of Father Son and Spirit (drawn, in part from the theology of John the beloved disciple), we can often be all too quick to describe the work of God the Father as one of Creator of all things, and Judge of All. Recognising our failings to live up to the expectations of such a person, we then assign the redemptive, liberative work of Jesus to God the Son, leaving God the Spirit to be some form of strengthening agent in our lives and in the world.

The problem of such an apportioning of operation / agency, however, is that it misses the co-equal and co-active nature of the three persons. The Spirit and the Son are just as much involved in the process of Creation as the Father, and – likewise – the Father and the Spirit are just as much involved in the process of Redemption as the Son. And, The Father and the Son are equally as involved in process of inward inspiration and instruction as the Spirit.

The Three persons are equally involved and active in all Divine intentions.

The Greek term used to define the co-equal action of this co-equal relationship of the three persons of the Trinity is *perichoresis* (which could be translated as ‘going around’). The relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit interweave and intersect and interact, and co-act: a constancy of movement in which all three are equal, all three are involved, and all three interlinked.

The drive or purpose of that co-equal, collaborative movement is Love. As the persons of the Trinity act, and interact, in love, the love they exist within comes spilling out, into a process of creating, redeeming, and sustaining.

I suppose that, really, none of this should surprise us.

After all, the foundational understanding of our sacred Scriptures is that we were made in the image and likeness of our creator: a likeness which includes the desire not only to be loved, but to express love.

Modelled in the image of God, we are relational beings, expressing this need and instinct in a variety of often complex, inexplicable relationships. Yet, when (like the relationship of the three-persons of the Trinity) those relationships are co-equal - situations in which those involved can each create and sustain, renew and redeem - then, inevitably, they too result in the outpouring of love: becoming expressions of godliness in a world which exists first and foremost because of a desire to express and share love.

Perhaps, now, having tied ourselves a little into knots (most definitely another Trinity illustration), as we reflect upon a God whose very existence is Love and relationship, and whose most earnest desire for us is that we live in loving, co-equal relationships, we should encourage reflect upon our response to such a reality.

The Sixteenth Century Anglican Priest and Poet, George Herbert, in his poem, *Trinitie Sunday*, offers this response, to a Loving, dynamic God, whose actions spill out Creatively, Redemptively, and Sustainingly.

*Lord, who hast form'd me out of mud,
And hast redeem'd me through Thy bloud
And sanctifi'd me to do good;*

*Purge all my sinnes done heretofore:
For I confesse my heavie score,
And I will strive to sinne no more.*

*Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me,
With faith, with hope, with charitie;
That I may runne, rise, rest, with Thee.*