

## Trinity Sunday

“All for one and one for all!”

By Rev Dr Tokerau Joseph

Readings:        Genesis 1 – 2:4a

                      Psalm 8

                      2 Cor. 13: 11 – 13

                      Matthew 28: 16 – 20

The Trinity is never an easy topic to explain. The church believes in God, but it also affirms God as Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. The complexity is more so when we say that God is

One and yet is also Three. God is Three-in-One and One-in-Three.

This way of thinking about God reminds me of the well-known saying of the three musketeers. Can you say it together with me, please: “All for one and one for all!”

“All for one and one for all!” At the heart of this saying is the idea that the “one” and the “all” are together – are community.

Our theological understanding of God as Trinity is the understanding of God as

community. In the Gospels, Jesus had on numerous occasions referred to the Father as the one who sent him into the world. Last week we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit as one promised by Jesus who would abide within them and empower them as witnesses for God.

Our Gospel and Epistle texts make the Trinity very explicit. “Go and make therefore and disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19). And from where our benediction is taken from in 2 Corinthians 13:13, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the

love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

But we may ask how the Trinity is God of community? A classical Trinitarian understanding of God is “one in essence, distinguished in three persons.” Such a view was, in part, to guard against the misunderstandings of *subordinationism* (ranks of order of deity), *modalism* (mere masks of God’s being), and *tritheism* (individual and separate deities).<sup>1</sup> The Trinitarian persons are not isolated and

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 61-62.

independent selves but have their personal identity in relationship.

The relationship between the three elements of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and their unity has been described as “perichoresis.” This is a word from which we also get the word “choreography” for dance. The concept of perichoresis was one which recognised the interactive nature of the triune community where by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could only function together. Perichoresis allows the individuality of the persons in God to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two.

An image often used to express this idea is that of “community of being,” in which each person of the Trinity, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them. We heard of this a few Sundays back when Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17. In this prayer Jesus continually affirmed that his Father was in him just as he was in the Father. Though distinct from each other, the persons of the Trinity can only truly be themselves when in relationship with each other. Theologian Miroslav Volf explains it this way:

The one divine person is not only itself,  
but rather carries within itself also the

other divine persons, and only in this indwelling of the other persons within it is it the person it really is. The Son is Son only insofar as the Father and Spirit indwell him; without this interiority of the Father and Spirit, there would be no Son. The same applies to the Father and to the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

The implication of such an intertwined divine relationship is that one cannot be acknowledged without the others – hence Jesus’ remark, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

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<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 209.

This follows on to another understanding of the triune relationship as being one of “appropriation.” Appropriation maintains that the works of the Trinity are a unity; every person of the Trinity is involved in every outward action of God. For example, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all involved in the work of creation although it is understood to be the distinctive work of the Father; this is likewise true regarding the work of redemption, although this is primarily seen as the distinctive work of the Son. Taken together, the doctrines of perichoresis and appropriation allow us to think of God as a “community of being,” in which all is shared, united, and mutually exchanged.



We get a hint of this kind of thinking about God in our Genesis reading of creation. The God of community is the Spirit who broods over the waters (Gen. 1:2); the one who says “let *us* make humankind in *our* image” (1:26). The language here refers to an image of inner-divine consultation among those involved in the process of creation. And as mentioned earlier, the heart of this Priestly creation poem is the understanding that God isn’t just creating the world; the God of community is creating a community.

What we have explored so far about the Trinity has much in common with the cheer of “All for one and one for all.” The doctrine of God as

triune is one that is grounded in the idea of community. The texts from Matthew and 2 Corinthians were ones that not only affirmed this idea; they also affirmed it for the nature of the life of those who believed it. As such, community is also God's will for God's people.

Therefore, the Trinitarian understanding of God as community is fundamental to the understanding of the church as those who relate together in community.

Last Sunday, we celebrated Pentecost and the birthday of the Christian church. We also had an ecumenical Pentecost service that evening

here at First Church organised by the inner city ministers. It was a wonderful demonstration of the diverse Christian communities and cultural communities represented in Dunedin unified in fellowship together. The different languages used and the various gifts presented by the communities revealed a Pentecost-like experience.

The theme of that service was the question “Has Christ been divided?” This was a question by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:13) with respect to his concern of their disunity.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul identified problems with groups separating themselves from others because of loyalty to different leaders. Some were saying “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas” (1 Cor. 1:12). There were some in the church who doubted or were not willing to accept the authority of Paul as an Apostle.

In his second letter from chapter 10 to 12, Paul again had to defend his ministry as an Apostle. It showed that some in the church were struggling with Paul’s leadership and teaching about God and the church.

Just before our reading in chapter 13, Paul warns the church about their life together as Christians. In verse 5 he challenges them: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realise Jesus Christ is in you?”

Paul is not suggesting that Christians have to prove their faith in Jesus Christ. But, because of their belief in Christ, it should be demonstrated in the way they live. More importantly, it should be demonstrated in the way they exercise their faith *together as a community*. Paul urges that they reconsider their attitudes and practices so to enable *a shared life together*.

Paul culminates all he has said in verse 13: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” He doesn’t try to explain the Trinity of how God is Three-in-One and One-in-Three. Paul simply conveys that the faith and life of the church is grounded in the grace, love, and fellowship of the God of community. If the church believes in the God of community, then members of the church must try to live together in God’s grace, love and fellowship.

As followers of Jesus, our faith in God is demonstrated through our baptism and commitment to the teachings of Christ in the

church. Our baptism is not only in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, but it is also into the community of the God of community. God's presence with us through the Holy Spirit "until the end of the age" is a sign of God's continued and constant fellowship with us. It is a fellowship that also continues to enable our fellowship with each other in a shared life together as the church.

We cannot live in each other (perichoreisis) as the Trinity does. But we do have the Holy Spirit living in us. As the Spirit is in the Son and Father, and they are both in the Spirit, and the Spirit is in us, then it stands to reason that we are in God just as God is in us. The God of

community lives in us as we live in community with each other. It is in our life of community that we share and exchange with each other something of ourselves. We give to and receive from each other when we are together. We learn from each other when we are together.

This way of relating with one another through the Spirit opens us up to one another and allows us to recognise, appreciate and accept other Christians in their uniqueness. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is experienced by those who know it as both the love that binds and the freedom that provides the space for relations between Christians to work things out together.



I'd like to close with what German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann says about this kind of fellowship.

“Love confers that which is held in common, freedom opens up the scope of what is individual and singular. Both aspects must be noted when we are talking about the fellowship of the life-giving Spirit. Without freedom, love crushes the diversity of what is individual; without love, freedom destroys what is shared and binds us together. Community which serves life can therefore only be understood as integrating, and as creating unity in diversity, while at the same time differentiating and

making diversity possible...We call this *the Trinitarian fellowship of the Spirit.*”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Khol (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 220.