

Views from the Pews: Trinity Sunday

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity insists that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three persons of the Trinity, are distinct, but not divided; different, but not separate or independent, and all interlinked by love. This idea of “one God in three persons” has always been hard to understand. The early theologians had to work through many possible formulations, ejecting some as heretical, amid fierce arguments. Eventually, the Church settled on the agreed definition most familiar to us, as summarised in the Nicene Creed adopted in the late 4th century.

Part of the problem is that the Latin *persona* originally meant a mask, as worn by actors to indicate the role they were playing; one actor could therefore wear more than one mask. Hence, God could be thought of as one actor playing three distinct roles in the drama of salvation. But when translated into our word *person*, the meaning changes for us: a person is a single unit, independent of other persons. So how can we speak of God as three persons, and yet still as only one person?? There is the famous comparison with the three leaflets of a single clover leaf. But there is another, much more personal analogy.

One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Matt 22: 35-37.

In Luke 10:27, Jesus’ citation from Hebrew is expanded to ‘heart, soul, strength and mind’. Both quote Moses’s formulation, “*You shall...*”, as a command in the singular future imperative tense. It is applied specifically and individually to body, soul and mind, the separate but interlinked components of a single human person. It recognises that these three aspects of our single human nature, which are distinct, but not divided; different but not separate or independent, must all love God and each other in their own ways.

According to theologian Alister McGrath, Augustine taught that humanity is created, not merely in the image of God, but in the image of the Trinity. So, by the grace of God, we can humbly model the Trinity in our own experience of body, soul and mind as different but loving and completely inter-dependent parts of our own personalities,

Kim King