

# The Trinity and the Bible

## It's a myster(ion).

Let me come right out at the beginning here and say that I regard the Trinity as a mystery; a mystery so impenetrable that at least 1500 years of enquiry were unable to grasp it; a mystery that prompted the wisest of God's people to search with intensity and the greatest of care to no avail.

Of course you are probably thinking that you already knew that. Everyone knows that the Trinity is fundamentally mysterious and that it is difficult, if not impossible to understand. If that's all we have to say we can finish the series now. But the kind of mystery I want to talk about is the kind which the New Testament talks about; a mystery which was hidden for long ages past in the time of the prophets but has now, with the coming of Jesus Christ, been brought to light. We may never fully understand the nature of exactly who God is and how he can be three and one; but what God has revealed to us through his apostles and through his Son we can know something about. This is the kind of mystery I want to talk about tonight.

## Back to the beginning

To introduce this mystery the New Testament writers take us back in time; back to the very beginning of things. Like one of those art-house films where we keep seeing the same scene again and again from new angles to build up a fuller picture of what's going on; John 1:1 rewrites the first verse of Genesis 1 with the frame pulled in tight to focus on what we couldn't see with the wide angle.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," says Genesis 1.

"In the beginning was the Word," says John 1:1, "and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." As we zoom in on God as he creates we see that there is more going on. The simple singularity of God's presence and interaction with his creation turn out to be more complicated than we saw originally. In Genesis 1 God speaks to create the world; in John 1 those very words by which God creates are seen as having their own distinct identity; "the Word was with God and the Word was God."

This of course is not a contradiction of Genesis 1. God is still the one who makes the world. Instead what's being introduced here with this image is something fundamental to the way the New Testament understands the relationships between the persons of the Trinity: that alongside the one God who creates the world and speaks to humanity and saves his people, there is another in whom God the Father is communicated and through whom he works in the world.

3Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (Jn 1:3)

"In these last days, [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" says the next verse. (Heb 1:2-3)

"God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.(Colossians 1:20)

"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. ... Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. (Jn 14:9)

This pattern that the Son is from the Father and that somehow the Father is expressed in or through the Son is absolutely bedrock to the Trinity as it is presented in the Bible. And it's also the key to understanding the Trinity because in it we begin to see how God is one and three at the same time.

On the one hand it shows us how there is one God and not three. There is only one God because there is only one source of divinity, one centre of holiness and power and purpose and creativity. And that centre is called the Father. Paul, writing in 1Cor 8:6 refutes the idea that there might be more than one God by saying:

"For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." 1Corinthians 8:6

## The key to understanding the Trinity

Paul preserves the unity of God by telling us that the Father alone is God. Yet at the same time he immediately follows up this statement by speaking of the Son; through whom are all things and through whom we exist. The Son too Paul is saying is to be credited with everything God is and does because everything that the Father is and does is expressed through him.

If this sounds confusing and maybe disturbing here's an illustration that might help.

It's like walking into a shop — one of those old family run places where the name on the door reads Smith and Son. In one sense "Smith" refers to the older man who sits out the back and does the paperwork; but if you ask the young man at the counter you will find out that he is Smith too. If the term is used as a personal name it belongs to the Father — he is the Smith whose name is on the sign. Yet when it refers to a family name we find out there is another man who can be called Smith in exactly the same way because he belongs to Smith's family\*.

The relations between the Persons of the Trinity in one way are something like this. The language of Father and Son contains the idea that the Son is an extension or a repetition of the Father's nature in much the same way that Smith junior is an extension of Smith senior's line or a repetition of Smith's nature.

Of course this analogy isn't perfect — although Father and Son language is the dominant way the relations between the first two persons are presented; and although a passage like Eph 3:15 make it sound like human fatherhood is derived somehow from God's inner life. Still there are a few crucial differences between the way human parents and their children are related and the way God the Father and his Son are tied together. And maybe you have already thought of some differences as you listened to the analogy.

One important difference of course is that human parenthood is kind of generic and historic. By that I mean that a Father has a Son at a certain point in time and, in one sense, that concludes their connectedness. The Son is now another Smith (or whatever) in his own right and will go on being Smith whatever happens to his father.

But with God things are much more dynamic than that. In the first place there is no moment when the Father produced the Son — their relationship is eternal. "In the beginning was the Word...he was with God in the beginning," says John 1. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" says Jesus in Revelation 22 echoing the words of God the Father in verse 6 of the previous chapter. The Father has always been and the Son has always been.

Nor is the relationship between God and the Son simply generic as if God had kind of budded-off another God. His Sonship is not something that he got from the Father and now possesses independently so we might say he is another God just like his Father before him. Rather the divine nature — whatever it is that makes him one with God — is imparted to him continually and dynamically as indicated by the images of Word or Radiance or by descriptions of the Father living in him and doing his work.

## The Father's natural agent

This dynamism is more normally expressed in personal ways of course. The Son is the one through whom God creates and speaks like a parent might involve his or her child in a project or send them with a message. Here the Son is the Father's agent in all that the Father does: listen to how Jesus puts it in Jn 5:17-23

17Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." 18For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

19Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. 20For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. 21For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. 22Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, 23that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

Do you see how this brings together the things we have been talking about? In verse 18 the Jews recognise that

\* I am grateful to AFES staffworker Dave Walter for this very useful thought of comparing the divine nature to a family name.

when Jesus is calling God his Father he is claiming to share his nature — to be equal with him. Certainly there had been other “Sons of God” in the Old Testament. Angels (eg. Job1; Ps 89; Gen 6; Deut 32:8), human rulers (Ps 2; 2Sam 7; Ps 82) and even the people of Israel (Ex 4) are occasionally given this title. But there it seems to be to do with a relationship given or delegated to them. Angels and kings have in some sense a god-like authority, Israel is chosen by God and given the status of God’s first-born son.

But with Jesus the term is used so frequently — so naturally; so personally, that it’s impossible to avoid the idea that he’s claiming to be God’s Son by nature.

To the Jews of course this is blasphemy. ”Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” says the famous passage known as the Shema in Deut 6. But here is another person claiming to also have the divine nature making himself out to be equal with God. Leaving aside the fact that they think Jesus is just a man, it sounds like a fundamental attack on the idea that there is only one God.

But Jesus quickly heads off this idea. The fact that he shares God’s nature and is therefore equal with God does not mean that he is holding himself up as a competing God or second authority. His equality with the Father is real but it is also dynamic and dependent so the unity of God is preserved. “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”

So the Son’s relationship to his Father is both natural like a Son and dynamic like a process. And this is really crucial. If all we saw was the natural relationship we might think that he was claiming God had produced another god— which is what the Jews seemed to think. But if all we had was God working through him then his actions wouldn’t really belong to him. Then we might conclude that he was just an exalted servant — maybe a kind of superangel as envisaged by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. But because he inherits both the Father’s nature and the Father’s actions it is right to see him both as the agent of the Father and yet also as the owner of those things that the Father does through him.

So we read that “whatever the Father does the Son also does.” and “ just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” and again “the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.”

On the one hand we hear that it’s the Father working and the Son can do nothing of himself. Yet on the other hand when the Father works through this Son the Son also receives the full credit because he is connected to God by nature.

Here is another analogy which might help clarify this stuff. Imagine that your father has a special and valuable heirloom perhaps a gold watch that has been in the family for 300 years. It is the family’s great treasure and it is going to be passed down to you when your Father dies. And then your next door neighbour gets sick and the only way she can be saved is through some expensive medical procedure that neither she nor anyone she knows can afford. But your Father comes to you and he says I want you to do a very difficult thing. I want you to take this gold watch of mine — I want you to take it to Southerbys and sell it for the best price you can get and then I want you to take the money and give it to our neighbour. And you look at that watch and then you quietly take it and you sell it and you give that money to your neighbour and her life is saved.

Now who does your neighbour thank? Does she thank your Father or does she thank you? Someone might argue that she would just thank your Father. After all it’s his watch — you just ran an errand for him. But of course that would be crazy wouldn’t it? The watch belongs to you too because you are your Father’s heir. It wasn’t just your father who gave it up but you did too. You both surrendered this treasure to save her life. You would both be worthy of exactly the same thanks.

And the way your father performs this act of generosity ensures that you receive the thanks. He doesn’t need to involve you in the transaction after all. The watch is his; he could go off and sell it and hand over the money by himself. But by asking you to do it he ensures that you are the one who receives the credit. You share completely in the sacrifice and you personally receive the thanks from the sick neighbour and her family.

## The Father's plan for the Son

Well this is something like the pattern we see in the relationship between the Son and Father isn't it? The Father does everything through the Son and shares everything he does with his Son. And he works this way specifically to bring honour and glory to his Son. "the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does"; "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father."

It doesn't have to be this way, of course. It's quite possible to imagine a situation where the Son is the one through whom God works and yet we do not know it because he is transparent in that process. After all, that's how things used to be in the Old Testament. The Word was active in Genesis 1 according to John 1 but we didn't find out about it until we were told about it later. And that too is basically the same situation with the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Along with the Son we are told that there is a third person through whom the Father and Son work and are made known, but — though the Spirit is equally God, in the same way that the Son is God — his way of working is mostly invisible. He's like the wind says Jesus in John 3 — you hear the effects of his passing but you can't see him. If the Son is like the radiance of the Father's glory, the Spirit is more like a lens that works invisibly to bring that light into focus and operation. Listen to how Jesus puts it in John 16:13-15

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine.

We see the same kind of thing in Acts 1:8. Jesus says:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Notice how in both these passages the mission of the Spirit is to facilitate the glorification of Jesus. He doesn't speak on his own but only what he hears. Implicitly he doesn't glorify himself — it's Jesus he glorifies. Jesus is at the centre of the Trinity's work — the visible manifestation of all that is the Father's; the one whom the Spirit invisibly magnifies and communicates.

People often get upset when they come to hear things on the Trinity because they don't think there's enough said about the Spirit. "We heard lots about the Father and Son but what about the Spirit?" they ask. The trouble is that the Spirit doesn't want to talk that much about himself. Yes his existence is revealed to us; yes we know that God sustains and creates everything through him; yes we know that nobody can understand the gospel unless the Spirit changes his or her heart; and yes we know that through the Spirit God lives amongst us. But basically he performs these tasks transparently. It's Jesus he wants us to look at and Jesus he presents to us. The glory of Jesus is the focus of the Spirit's work just as it dictates the way the Father works through Jesus; "that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father."

Which brings us back to where we were before.

Let me ask you how you would go about introducing the story of the Bible to someone who wasn't familiar with it? Where would you begin? What would you point to as the major theme? What would you see as the goal or conclusion of the story? I think most of us would probably begin with creation and talk about sin and God's efforts to rescue us from judgement through the death of Jesus on the cross. In short we would present a summary of what is commonly called Salvation History.

Now I have no wish to criticise this emphasis or this way of telling the Bible's story. Explaining the Bible's message is first and foremost an urgent matter of life and death and we need to tell people where they stand in relation to God so they can be saved. But it's also true that there another way to tell the Bible's story which begins before the creation of the world and focusses on God's secret plan to glorify his Son. We have already glimpsed this plan and purpose in Jn 5:23. We also saw it explicitly in Hebrews 1:2 which speaks about God appointing his Son to be heir of the Universe. But we can find other references to it in other places too. It's there in Col 1:16 where Paul writes that by Christ, "all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."

It's there too in Ephesians 1 where he speaks of God choosing us in Christ before the creation of the world and revealing the; "mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

God's secret purpose for this world, then; the secret that lies behind salvation history is for the world to belong to his Son and to bring honour to his Son.

Of course when we speak of this deeper purpose to history which lies behind salvation history this is not to suggest that the two things are separate. They are intimately connected. As we will see tomorrow when Paul Barker takes us through Rev 5; it is the cross which supremely brings honour to the Son. It is the cross by which he wins a people who are for the praise of his glory. Yes he is also the creator; yes he sustains the Universe by his powerful word but the thing that brings all creation to its knees in the throne room of God is his death on our behalf.

What is more the Son's glory and our salvation are connected not just by his death but by his resurrection. When the Son of God rises from the dead it is still as a man. Of course it's a transformed humanity — a spiritual humanity according to Paul in 1Cor 15 but humanity nonetheless. Humanity is seen to be not simply a temporary humiliation which he goes through for our sakes but Christ's glorious destiny. His destiny and ours is completely interlocked in the purposes of God.

So when the writer of Hebrews wants to prove that Jesus is superior to angels he turns to prophecies about people. Firstly to Psalm 2 and Psalm 45 and 2Samuel 7 which mention the honour given to David and his descendants, but more shockingly in Hebrews 2 he turns to Psalm 8 which is simply about humans.

5It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. 6But there is a place where someone has testified:

"What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

7You made him a little<sup>[1]</sup> lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor 8and put everything under his feet.<sup>[2]</sup>

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.

9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

10In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. 11Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. What an astonishing claim this is. The Son of God; the Eternal Word; the creator of the Universe becomes one of us and stays one of us. All God's promises to us turn out to promises between the Father and the Son. We open the new Testament thinking it's all about us and it turns out that it's really about Jesus — but also about us because now he's one of us. It's as if somehow we have been scooped up in the embrace as the Father hugs his Son.

What does all this say about us? What does it say about human nature that the Son of God could become one forever and still be himself? What does it say about human nature that the Father would want his Son to become one of us? Surely it says that being a human being is to be something very special.

Just recently I finished reading *The Lion and the Witch and the Wardrobe* to my daughter for the first time and was struck again by that wonderful scene where Aslan enters the Witch's palace and begins turning all the stone figures back into courtyard. When it's all done Aslan organises his new army to go and fight the Queen:

"Those who can't keep up ... must ride on the backs of those who can — that is, lions, centaurs, unicorns, horses, giants and eagles. Those who are good with their noses must come in front with us lions to smell out where the battle is. Look lively and sort yourselves."

And with a great deal of bustle and cheering they did. The most pleased of the lot was the other lion who kept running about everywhere pretending to be very busy but really in order to say to everyone he met, "Did you hear what he said? Us Lions. That's what I like about Aslan. No side, no stand-off-ishness. Us Lions. That meant him and me."

In the eternal Son of God we have one who says "us humans" who is happy to be one of us.

And of course it doesn't stop there. Humans are not special just because the Son becomes one of us. Just as he

shared what we are and so saved us; so “in Jesus” or “in him” as Paul keeps putting it we too share in everything he is.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears,<sup>[1]</sup> we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1Jn 3:2)

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev 3:21-22)

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Rom 8:16-17)

God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:6-7)

The mystery of the Trinity is finally a secret that emerges around and amongst us. It is the Father working through his Son to bring glory to the Son. It is the Spirit also working invisibly on the same project. It is the Son humbling himself and becoming human and then being raised as a glorious human by the will of the Father. It is the glory due to Jesus who not simply bears our sins but brings us into the Father's embrace.