



30th May | Trinity Sunday

The Trinity makes us a community, not a club.

Main Point:

Knowing our God as the first loving community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit defines and shapes how Christian community is understood, how Christian community is to be lived and how Christian community can be healed when it is broken.

Intro |

Today, we call to mind the mystery of the Trinity. Only recently did I learn that Pope Gregory IX instituted Trinity Sunday in the year 828 – which was rather revolutionary at the time, as it was the only Christian festival that celebrated a *doctrine* rather than an *event* in the Christian story.

The doctrine of the Trinity remains a hugely theologically complex concept for all of us. In fact, it makes our minds short-circuit if we try to fully understand it.

So, if I was to ask how the doctrine of the Trinity impacts your day-to-day lives, or what we do here in church, I'd expect to see many looks of bewilderment.

But if we were to unpack what it means for us to worship the Triune God – the God who reveals himself as three-in-one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we will be better positioned to take hold of this 'hard-to-understand mystery', and to recognise the profound impact it has on who we are and what we do as we gather as God's people.

Before we start, I'd like to pose a theological question that has been around for many years, though its answer has certainly changed over time.

If I asked, 'Why did God create the world and humankind?' how would you answer?

When I was growing up, I pondered this very question. I quizzed Sunday school teachers and Scripture teachers alike and a myriad of answers came back at me. One particular answer, however, stands out – and not because of its correctness but because of the buzz it stirred in theological circles.

During the 1980s a popular belief was that humankind was the pinnacle of creation; God made the earth and everything in it for humankind's enjoyment.

Such a belief was no doubt prompted by the creation story, that God made woman so man was not alone, he could enjoy the company of the woman. And, in like fashion, the idea grew that God, being alone, made the world in which humans could live, for He needed humans, to love.

The doctrine of the Trinity completely blows away such thinking. In fact, Paul spells out very clearly why God created humankind and the world and all therein:

“For through [Christ] God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see— such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him.” (Colossians 1:16)

God didn’t create creation for humanity, nor did he make humanity because He was lonely.

He created humans as a loving gift for His Son.

So back to Trinity Sunday ...

It is from the love between the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit that we begin to understand the meaning of ‘community’.

Yes. We rightly say we worship the triune God and in so doing, we acknowledge the Godhead as the divine, first and ultimate ‘community’.

For the last two weeks, on Ascension Sunday and on Pentecost Sunday, we have looked at the ‘Community of God’ at work.

Point 1 | The Ascension of Christ shows that the body of Christ, the Church, now sits WITHIN the Divine Community of God.

On Ascension Sunday, Bishop Peter reminded us of Jesus’ magnificent ascension into heaven.

The ascension is usually portrayed as Jesus rising into the sky, until He was out of sight. Indeed, no matter how hard the Apostles strained to see Him, the angels told them, “Jesus has been taken from you into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

I’m sure the Apostles were left with a profound sense of abandonment. They probably whispered to each other, ‘He’s gone and left us. We’re down here, but He is now up there.’

We can often be like that. Don’t we at times imagine Jesus up there in heaven, sitting at the right hand of God, enjoying sweet fellowship with the Father while we are down here on earth – all by ourselves, trying to live it out as best we can.

But, if we were to ask the Apostle Paul whether the picture we’re imagining, of Jesus sitting up in the heavenlies at the right hand of God the Father, he would say our thinking is off the mark. Paul would remind us of the words of assurance he wrote to the believers in Ephesus:

“God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-6.

If we are to correctly visualise Jesus in God’s heavenly presence, in full enjoyment of the community of the Godhead, then we need to take our place *within* that divine community!

The fellowship God enjoys between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is no longer distant from us.

Rather, God is so rich in mercy and loved us so much that He sent His Son into the world, to reconcile the world to Himself, and placed us **INTO** His Son, so that we now share in the fellowship of the Godhead.

Doesn’t that blow you away? I believe that’s the very reason why Jesus asked His Father:

"I am praying ... for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me." (John 17:21)

Did you hear that! **"That they may be IN us."**

That the Christian Church has been placed **within** the fellowship of the Godhead is what profoundly shapes our identity – we have been made the community of God here on earth.

Point 2 | The Christian community is more than just a gathering of like-minded individuals.

Let's pause for a moment and think again of the word 'community'.

There is an advertisement on TV at the moment, which vividly depicts what most people think of when they hear the word 'community'.

[Play video – 30 seconds]

One picture after another of smiling people, enjoying each other's company, satisfying their every desire.



It does look a bit like us throughout the week, doesn't it? But is that who we really are? A group of people who get together on Sundays, and sometimes in between, simply to enjoy one another's company? Much like a club?

The events of Pentecost suggest otherwise.

Point 3 | The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost shows us God's community is be ethnically and culturally diverse.

Clubs, by their very nature, have three distinct characteristics.

Firstly, clubs are exclusive – people are divided into two groups – members and non-members. Members pay to belong; non-members come along as guests.

Secondly, clubs are driven by members' interests and wants. Clubs are made up of individuals who enjoy the same activities, lifestyle choices and values. If an individual is not satisfied, they leave and join another club.

Thirdly, clubs create their own culture. Membership fees, codes of dress and conduct create within a club its own unique culture to which its members aspire.

Unfortunately, churches can operate like clubs. We need to ask ourselves, 'How do we approach the visitor who walks through our doors? Do we make them feel welcome? Do we accept them as they are? Do we avoid the non-English speaking visitor? Do we invite them home as we would another of our church family?'

If we don't pass the test, we need to read again how the Spirit moved on Pentecost and how the disciples responded!

Do you remember the passage Colin read last week written by Luke, with its list of very hard place names? Luke lists people from more than 15 nations, saying they all heard the message of the wonders of God declared to them in their own language.

When we look at how the church of Jesus Christ is made up around the world, it is remarkable how the Christian message has spread despite different dialects – different cultures - different ways of doing things - different ways of viewing the world. When you become a disciple of Jesus Christ you don't lose your nationality or culture – you simply reflect the Gospel story in your own idiosyncratic way.

Because Christ's body, the church, is seated *with* Jesus in heavenly places, which is certainly culturally neutral territory, all of our cultural differences become united by the one Son, through the one Spirit, reconciled to the One Father.

As we move into the season of Pentecost, and begin a series on 2 Corinthians, we'll see how diversity is central to a Gospel-shaped Church.

Well – all this is sounding wonderful – we are a Christian community enjoying the same fellowship that is enjoyed within the Community of God.

But alas! You and I know, we are an imperfect reflection of God's perfect community – we are a work in progress.

What happens when the Christian community, patterned after God's perfect community, absorbs fallen individuals who fail to live up to God's wonderful example?

Point 3 | God's community looks to a startlingly unique and powerful grievance policy.

We admit that our being together in community is going to be a blurry reflection of God's perfect community. So we must accept one another's weaknesses. We accept that, in our new Spirit-filled community, people will have different ways of expressing worship of God.

Application | Let's turn to the Apostle Paul for the final word. He tells the believers at Colossae clearly about how they were to reflect the perfect Trinitarian community of God to the world around them:

"Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility gentleness and patience. Make allowances for each other's faults and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.

For, as members of one body, you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful. Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father." (Colossians 3:12-17)

Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Is the Holy Trinity a meaningful and important element of your faith? Why or why not?
2. How is the image of the trinitarian community helpful or unhelpful to you?
3. How is the Trinity the basis for all Christian community? What differences does it make to us at Southlakes that God's love for each member of the Godhead is sufficient in itself?

A powerful parable with an important message:

On a dangerous seacoast notorious for shipwrecks, there was a rough little lifesaving station. Actually, it was merely a hut with only one boat, but the few members kept a constant watch over the turbulent sea.

With little thought for themselves, they would go out day & night tirelessly searching for those in danger as well as the lost. Many lives were saved by this brave band who faithfully worked as a team in and out of the lifesaving station. By and by, it became a famous place.

Some of those who had been saved, as well as others along the seacoast, wanted to become associated with this little station. They were willing to give their time, energy and money in support of its objectives. New boats were purchased. New crews were trained. The station, once obscure and a bit shabby and virtually insignificant, began to grow.

Some of its members were unhappy the hut was so unattractive and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided.

Emergency beds were replaced with lovely furniture. Rough, handmade equipment was discarded, and sophisticated, classy systems were installed.

The hut, of course, had to be torn down to make room for all the additional equipment, furniture, and systems. By the time of its completion, the lifesaving station had become a popular gathering place, and its objectives had begun to shift.

It was now used as a sort of clubhouse, an attractive building for public gathering. Saving lives, feeding the hungry, strengthening the fearful, and calming the disturbed rarely occurred.

Fewer members were interested in braving the sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired professional lifeboat crews to do this work. The original goal of the station wasn't altogether forgotten, however. Lifesaving motifs still prevailed in the club's decorations.

There was a liturgical lifeboat preserved in the Room of Sweet Memories with soft, indirect lighting, which helped hide the layer of dust upon the once-used vessel.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the boat crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty, some terribly sick and lonely. Others were "different" from the majority of the club members. The beautiful new club suddenly became messy and cluttered.

A special committee saw to it that a shower house was immediately built outside, away from the club so victims of the shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting there were strong words and angry feelings, which resulted in a division among the members.

Most of the people wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities and all involvements with shipwreck victims. As you'd expect, some still insisted on saving lives, that this was their primary objective – that their only reason for existence was ministering to anyone needing help regardless of their club's beauty or size or decorations. They were voted down and told if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast! They did.

As the years passed, the new station experienced the same old changes. It evolved into another club – and yet another lifesaving station was begun. History repeated itself. And if you visit that coast today you'll find a large number of exclusive, impressive clubs along the shoreline owned and operated by slick professionals who have lost all involvement with the saving of lives.

Shipwrecks still occur in those waters, but now most of the victims are not saved. Every day they drown at sea, and so few others seem to care ... so very few.

4. The church has often been compared to a club – with startling differences identified. How do you think the community here at Southlakes differs from a club? In what ways are we too similar to a club?

Pentecost Prayer Devotional

This week in our prayer devotional we will begin learning about the power of praying together as a community of faith. Much of the content comes from *The Power of Praying Together* by Stormie Omartian.

