



# Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 63

Sunday 30th May 2021

## Today's readings

### 1 John 5:1–12 (“Faith conquers the world”)

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. Amen. (NRSV)

### Matthew 28: 16–20 (“The commissioning of the disciples”)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

- 1 *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God* (CH:641)
- 2 *There's a spirit in the air* (CH:616)
- 3 *Be still, for the presence of the Lord* (CH:189)
- 4 *Spirit of truth and grace* (CH:608)
- 5 *Christ triumphant, ever reigning* (CH:436)

# In the Name of the Father and of

Every year just after Pentecost the same Sunday rolls around. It is an important Sunday though it's one which perhaps tends to make preachers groan just a little. "Trinity Sunday *again???*", they sigh, thinking that it can't possibly be 12 months since the last one rolled around.

And yet here we are once more with the task of making sense of something which is at best a deep theological mystery and at worst the source of bamboozlement for ministers and congregations alike: the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

How are we to make sense of this Church teaching which says that God is One, and that God is also Three in One? And how are we supposed to latch on to one of the faith's most central doctrines when the term "Trinity" never once made it into the Bible? (I have looked but I have not found ... because it's nowhere to be seen in all of Scripture.)

In my ministry training almost 20 years ago, one of my placement supervisors had a great ability to take things that seemed complex and make them sound a whole lot simpler. Never was this skill more useful to me than the day we tentatively edged our conversation in the direction of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In our chat we spoke about the brain strain that is involved in saying that we are at one and the same time monotheistic (believing in a single God) and also able to regard this God "in three persons".

"Ah," said the scholarly minister, "that word 'persons' is the key to the problem."

And off he went, unpicking the doctrine of the Holy Trinity for me in terms of drama, theatre ... and masks (just as I will attempt to do for you now).

To be a great actor, it's not enough to say the lines with the right movements of hand and foot, the correct expressions of eye and mouth. Instead of going through the motions, the great actor has to take on a character's *character*. If they are bringing to life a saintly figure, then saintly is what they must feel. If a terrible tyrant or evil-doer, then they must tap into their inner Emperor Nero, or Hannibal Lecter. I can well imagine that this must be emotionally draining for any player of parts – even the very greatest of them.

If you buy a programme when you go to the theatre, you might find the list of actors headed with the Latin words: "Dramatis personae". Next, if you wander into the auditorium itself and glance up towards the ornate ceiling you might well spot a plasterwork depiction of two classical masks: one tragedy and the other comedy. These are "personae", and a "persona" in the world of ancient drama was indeed a physical mask, used by an actor to show the audience who they were being at any point in a production.

When theologians in the early Church started theologising about who God is, it seemed fitting to speak of God as being "of one substance", but strangely also being One who is encountered *in three personae*. And when we speak of God as being One, but also being *Three* in One, we are suggesting that God presents, as it were, with three masks.

When God "acts", God will be acting in the role of Father (eternal Source of all things), or Son (Redeemer, shown in frail, human form) or Spirit (Holy Presence in our lives).

Let's be clear about this: it is not that God is hiding behind three facades. No, not at all. Rather, to think of God being like an actor with three masks helps us recognise the different traits which God exhibits on the universal stage. For comparison, an excellent teacher will likely be kind, yet strict, yet fun-loving. But they are one person. Similarly with God, the three persons of Father, Son and Spirit work *together* in a complementary sense.

# the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

What do theologians mean when they speak about the masks – the personae – of God? This is symbolic language which points us as best it can to what God’s nature is like.

Christianity holds to the Oneness of God—that much is clear and for certain. The great insight of the Christian faith, however, is to say that God operates in our world and across the universe (from before the Creation and through to its fulfilment) as Father, as Son and as Spirit, identified in different ways for different settings, just like that actor who can readily be identified to his or her audience according to the mask which they present.

Crucially, as with so much in the realm of faith, here the believer quickly comes up against the limitations of language and the enormity of mystery. We can only use the words we have and deploy the metaphors that might work best, but in the complexities of reality, nothing we can say will ever be enough to convey the full notion of God’s “God-ness”. And our minds will always fall short when grappling with what it means to live with time and eternity, space and limitlessness, number and infinity.

If these are our ground rules, then we are always going to be playing catch-up, with the notion of mystery being our constant companion and our ever-present frustration. Our universe may be a confusing place, but it is undoubtedly the only place we have. Grasp that, and perhaps we free ourselves up to walk away from the intensity of the Holy Trinity and, rather, start enjoying living *within* the Holy Trinity.

Let’s make this a good deal more personal, by introducing the 14th century mystic, Mother Julian of Norwich, who said this:

*“Greatly ought we to rejoice that God dwells in our soul; and more greatly ought we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God.”*

And so we come to see that all of this is really to do with relationship. God is not a clever idea. God is not the highest aspiration of our knowledge. God is not the slightly-out-of-reach summit of our human aims and possibilities. God is Holy presence, real and true, dwelling in our soul as, with Mother Julian, we “rejoice that our soul dwells in God”.

I have said a lot here, and I have said enough for one sermon. But what I have not touched upon at all are the Bible readings which we find on page 1 of this week’s issue of *The Sunday Focus*. Our main reading is from the First Letter of John in which the notions of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are liberally mingled in across the passage. Our second reading comes from the final chapter of Matthew’s gospel: famous words in which we find Jesus using the phrase which you find spanning the top of these sermon pages. (Look up!)

My challenge to you is to take your copy of *The Sunday Focus* and go through these two readings several times over several days, allowing your mind to float across these three big questions:

1. What does the 1 John 5 passage tell you about the way God works as Source, Redeemer and Presence in the lives of the Church and her people?;
2. What does the Matthew 28 passage tell you about the reality of the trinitarian God to Jesus’ friends on a Galilean mountain, and to his friends here?; and
3. What does your life and faith tell you about the presence of God who is One ... yet also experienced in three persons?

Enjoy your contemplations, as God dwells in you, and you dwell in God.

Amen.

# Praying for others

*The Trinity protecting me;  
the Father be over me, the Saviour be under me, the Spirit be within me.  
The Holy Three enfolding me, ever more about me.*

We give you thanks for all who have shared their lives with us.

We pray for our homes, our loved ones,  
for friends who have guided us,  
for all who have been an example to us.

We pray for all who are disturbed, for all who are ill;  
we remember all who are not at peace with themselves or the world.  
Lord, be with each in their troubles and with all who care for them.

Lord, give to your people the blessing of peace.

We praise you for all who have come into the peace of your nearer presence:

for the saints in glory and for all whom we love.  
Lord, give to your people the blessing of peace.

In the strong name of the Trinity we pray. Amen.

## And finally . . .

*Abigail Morrison considers Christian Aid Week:*

Christian Aid week ran from Monday 10th to Sunday 26th May this year. You will remember our service on Sunday 9th May focused on the Christian Aid Week campaign for this year, which was about climate change. We heard about Florence, from Kenya, who had to walk for six hours a day to get water. This meant she couldn't get enough water to feed her crops. Climate change has led to rains being unreliable, causing either drought or flooding. Florence and her community struggled to grow enough food to eat. Christian Aid helped Florence and her community build an earth dam and this in turn has helped them water their crops and has made a real difference to their lives.

In a normal year our house-to-house collection for Christian Aid might raise a little less than £4,000. This year we knew it might be less as, to reduce Covid infection risks, we didn't go back to collect donations but hoped people would donate online. I'm glad to say that 37 people did donate online and we raised £1,280. Gift Aid will increase this to £1,564.

I think you will agree this is not too shabby at all! A very big thank you to the many people who delivered leaflets to all the homes in the village. And also a big thank you to everyone who gave a donation, to help get us to such a great total.

It's good to know our village can help others, in other villages far away, to cope a bit better with the challenges that climate change brings them.