



The Trinity: a priest's perspective teachers' notes

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Follow-up tasks

Ask pupils to look closer at this image, using the high-resolution image provided.

1. What do you see in this image?
2. What do you think is going on here?
3. What does it make you wonder?

For your reference, this image is from the Litlyngton Missal, one of the largest surviving English medieval manuscripts which was created for Westminster Abbey. This is an illuminated liturgical manuscript, and this image appears alongside the Bible written in Latin. In the context of the Trinity, pupils should recognise the three parts of this image – God; Jesus Christ on the cross; and the dove, which is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Pupils may discuss the size of God in contrast to Jesus Christ and the dove. They may also pick up on the different colours present. It may be helpful to share that gold often represents God, blue represents Heaven and red or brown represents Earth. This task is not about giving "right" answers to the questions above, but instead encouraging students to look slowly and closely at an image, taking time to discuss their interpretations and the meaning behind the image in relation to Christianity.



Ask pupils to discuss in pairs or in a small group: God is known and worshipped as Trinity – three in one and one in three. What symbols or images could you use to communicate this idea to others?

Ask pupils to write an answer to this essay question: “The Holy Spirit is the only everyday reminder of God’s presence.” To what extent do you agree?

Transcript

Why is the Trinity important to Christians? – beginning at [0.00:00]

Have you ever been given a gift that you weren't sure what to do with?

When I was 13, my dad gave me a copy of the Complete Works of Shakespeare. It's one of the heaviest gifts I've ever received. I knew it was important, because Dad had given it to me, and I'd been told what a great writer Shakespeare was. However, when I opened the pages and tried to read it, I struggled to make any sense of it. It was like a foreign language. It was a bit disappointing.

Then we started studying Shakespeare at school and, while I still didn't understand everything, I learned enough about Shakespeare's language and style to begin to look at other plays and even dipped into the odd sonnet. It still didn't make complete sense to me, but there was enough to keep me going - enough to realise that this is some of the greatest writing in the English language, and well worth all the effort to keep trying to understand it.

The doctrine of the Trinity is similar.

Like the Complete Works of Shakespeare, the doctrine of the Trinity is a gift - something we've been given - it's given to us through the events that the New Testament records; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the experience of the disciples and the early Church. The Bible doesn't exactly spell-out the doctrine of the Trinity - it's something that the Church has received, worked out and understood from generation to generation.

The fundamentals of the Trinity are that God is first 'Our Father' - that's how Jesus taught us to pray: 'Our Father who art in heaven.' In the Creed, God is 'the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.' And this same God, because we believe in one God not three, becomes a human being in Jesus of Nazareth, who is called The Son of God - born in Bethlehem; who lives, dies on the Cross and is raised again on the third day. And this same God pours out his life, love and power into the hearts and minds of the first believers at Pentecost as the Holy Spirit, and the same Holy Spirit continues to be poured into the hearts and minds of those who will receive him to this day. So, God is revealed in the New Testament as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; The Trinity.

But just like that Complete Works of Shakespeare, this is quite hard to make sense of. How can one be three? How can three be one? Either it sounds like we're actually talking about three gods, which can't be right for a monotheistic faith, or that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are just different 'modes'

or styles of God being God, with no meaningful difference between them - which then raises the question, who was Jesus talking to when he prayed to the father; was he just talking to himself? It's hard to make sense of this.

But just like that copy of the Complete Works of Shakespeare, if we can accept the Trinity as a gift - God's gift to help us understand who he is - better still if we practice the prayers and the worship that draw us deeper into the Trinity - then we might discover enough about it to know that this is the greatest insight we could be given into God, who is always going to be greater than our understanding, and that our efforts to keep learning and praying will be well worth it.

What is the most important teaching in the Bible that reveals the Trinity? – beginning at [0.04:06]

There are several important passages in the Bible where the Trinity is revealed or hinted-at, and it's quite hard to choose between them.

One important moment is when Jesus is baptised in the River Jordan. The gospel writer St Mark tells us that after Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove, the voice of the Father was heard from heaven saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' In this short story, we are shown the Father pouring out the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, the Son of God. We get a glimpse into the life of God the Trinity; the love of the Father for the Son, the beloved; the Son's obedient love for the Father showed in him becoming human; and the Holy Spirit uniting them in that love.

Another moment also relates to baptism, but this time it's when Jesus, after his resurrection, tells the disciples to go out and baptise other people. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, '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.' The interesting thing is that Jesus doesn't just say 'baptise them in my name.' He knew, of course he did, that it wasn't just about him, but about the Father who sent him, and the Spirit that would inspire and unite the Church for the rest of time.

Another significant moment is recorded in John's gospel, just before Jesus is betrayed to death. Jesus speaks to the disciples, who are anxious, and promises them that, although he will physically leave them, they will not be left helpless. He promises, 'I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the spirit of truth.'

Later, in chapter 17, when Jesus is praying for the disciples he says, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' In quite complicated language, we get a sense of the deep connection between Jesus and the Father - dwelling in one another - and of the disciples sharing in that deep connection, that life and love, through the Spirit. Again, we get a little glimpse of the life of God the Trinity, and how we are called into that life and love through Jesus, and the work of the Spirit.

These moments all come from the New Testament, but Christians maintain that God didn't just become the Trinity after Jesus was born. If God is revealed as Trinity through Jesus, then God must always have been Trinity, because God does not change. So, Christians have seen hints of the Trinity in the Old

Testament too. Famously, Abraham is visited by three 'men', to whom he gives hospitality, and who tell Abraham that he and his aged wife, Sarah, will have a son. It turns out that these three visitors are in fact 'The Lord', that is God. God in three persons - the Trinity, perhaps?

And I would argue that these are all important; and all other parts of the Bible too! The Trinity isn't just revealed by a few bits of the Bible; the whole sweep of the Old and New Testament points Christians forward to this difficult but essential insight into the nature of God.

How is the Trinity reflected in Christian worship today? – beginning at [0.08:24]

The doctrine of the Trinity says something about God in himself - the loving relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit - but it also says something about God's relationship with us and with all creation. In the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God unites himself with creation, by becoming a human being, so that through him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all creation can be united (reconciled) to God.

Christian worship is all about that relationship with God; the relationship that the Father has restored and made possible in the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. When Christians pray, then, they pray to the Father, through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians don't just pray to God, but within God the Trinity.

Prayer is our human spirit being guided by the Holy Spirit. St Paul wrote, 'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes (prays for us) with sighs too deep for words.'

And we pray 'in Christ', as members of his body. Again, St Paul wrote, 'We are one body, for we all share the one bread.' He's talking about the bread of Holy Communion, which is given to us as 'the Body of Christ.' We become together what we eat together, and so we pray together 'through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ.' (words taken from the Holy Communion Service).

So, our prayer and worship is not just about our relationship to God, in God, but our relationship to one another, in Christ, as his body, the Church. Worshipping God, who is the loving relationship, a communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, should bring us into loving communion with one another in Christ, by the Spirit.

The Trinity shapes how Christians pray; the Trinity is the pattern of our worship. Christians are baptised with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We begin the Eucharist, the Holy Communion service, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; and the name of the Trinity is repeated before the Sermon, and at the blessing, at the end of the service.

In short, the Trinity is reflected in Christian worship a great deal. In fact, if it doesn't reflect the Trinity, then it isn't really Christian worship. But it's not just Christian worship that should reflect the Trinity.

By praying and worshipping in the name of the Trinity, Christians are drawn deeper into the Trinity, and so they should begin to reflect the Trinity in two important ways: first, in holier lives, lives that are more

loving, more fully human, more like Jesus; and second, they should reflect the Trinity, that communion of love, through a deeper communion with one another, as one body, living together in ever greater unity and peace.

The Trinity should be reflected not just in Christian worship, but in Christian lives; in the life of the Church - and that is a constant challenge for all of us!