

Sunday service



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 31st May
Trinity Sunday
The Revd Phil Nevard



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Opening Music

Trisagion

arr Tommy Baily, Nathan Mickle, Fernando Ortega, performed by the Village Chapel Worship Team. OneLicence

Introduction

It's Trinity Sunday. If you've come looking for three-legged milking stools, three-leafed clovers, or helpful explanations involving ice, water, and steam, I should probably warn you early on: you won't find them here. I'm sure these things are on offer elsewhere. They've all done sterling service over the years. They've helped generations of ministers survive Trinity Sunday. But they've also quietly suggested that the Trinity is either a clever diagram or a problem to be solved if only we find the right metaphor. Today I want to start somewhere else.

I'm Rev'd Phil Nevard. I'm a minister in the Four Rivers Partnership in Eastern Synod. I've become increasingly convinced that the Trinity matters not because it explains God neatly, but because it stops us imagining God badly. Today we will be thinking about the Trinity not as a game of theological 3-D chess, but as a vision of God whose life is shared, relational, and resistant to domination. A God who is not solitary power, not constant surveillance, not controlled anger, and not distant management. A God whose very being is community. And if that is who God is, then being made in God's image has consequences for how we live, how we lead, how we disagree, and how we resist fear-driven or authoritarian ways of organising the world. Strap yourself in!

Call to Worship

Come, worship the God who is not alone.

Come, worship the God whose life is shared love.

Come, worship the God who makes room,
who calls us into community, and who meets us here.

Let us worship God together.

Hymn *I Bind Unto Myself This Day*

attributed to St. Patrick circa 372-466; Paraphrased by Cecil F. Alexander, 1889. Arranged by Rod Lewis ©2020 Five O' Silver Music for Church of the Apostles, Columbia Trinity Sunday and used with their kind permission.

I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same the Three in One and One in Three.

2. I bind this day to me forever
by power of faith,
Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in the Jordan river,
His death on Cross
for my salvation;
His bursting from the spiced tomb,
His riding up the heav'nly way,
His coming at the day of doom
I bind unto myself today.

3. I bind unto myself the power
of the great love of cherubim;
the sweet "Well done"
in judgment hour,
the service of the seraphim,
Confessors' faith, Apostles' word,
the Patriarchs' prayers,
the prophets' scrolls,
all good deeds done unto the Lord
and purity of virgin souls.

4. I bind unto myself today the
virtues of the star lit heaven,
the glorious sun's life giving ray,
the whiteness of the moon at eve,
the flashing of the lightning free,
the whirling wind's

tempestuous shocks,
the stable earth, the deep salt sea
around the old eternal rocks.

5. I bind unto myself today
the power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need.
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide,
His shield to ward;
the word of God to
give me speech,
His heav'nly host to be my guard.

6. Christ be with me,
Christ within me, Christ behind me,
Christ before me, Christ beside me,
Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me, Christ in quiet,
Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth
of friend and stranger.

7.I bind unto myself the Name, the strong Name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.
By whom all nature hath creation, Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation, salvation is of Christ the Lord.

Prayer of Approach

Loving God, you are not distant or alone.
You are a God of relationship and shared life.
We come to you tired of loud voices and weary of noisy dominance.
We come looking for a better way to live.
Draw us closer to you. Root us in your love.
Shape us by your Spirit, so that our worship, and our lives,
may reflect who you truly are. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

God of shared life, we confess that we often imagine you badly.
We turn you into a watcher rather than a companion,
a ruler rather than a presence,
an echo of our anger rather than the source of love.
We confess that we cling to control,
we seek certainty over compassion,
and we mistake dominance for strength.
We confess our fear of difference, our temptation to choose sides,
our habit of turning faith into a badge instead of a way of life.
Forgive us when we shrink you to fit our anxieties and our anger.
Forgive us, and remake us
in the image of your generous, relational love. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Hear the good news.
The God we meet in Christ does not seek to shame us or abandon us.

The love of God restores us. The grace of Christ meets us.
The fellowship of the Spirit renews us.
In God's shared life, we are forgiven, we are welcomed,
we are made new. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Reading Genesis 1:1–2:4a

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights--the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night--and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was

morning, the fourth day. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind and the cattle of every kind and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude. On the sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

Hymn *O Lord, Our Lord, Throughout The Earth*

John Bell (born 1949) after Psalm 8 ©1993 WGRG, c/o Iona Community CCLI Licence No. # A-734713 Sung by the choir of Victoria Methodist Church, Bristol and used with their kind permission.

O Lord, our Lord,
throughout the earth
how glorious is your name,
and glorious too
where unseen heavens
your majesty proclaim.
On infant lips,
in children's song
a strong defence you raise
to counter enemy and threat,
and foil the rebel's ways.

2 When I look up,
and see the stars
which your own fingers made,
and wonder at the moon and stars,
each perfectly displayed;
then must I ask,
'Why do you care?
Why love humanity?
And why keep every
mortal name
fixed in your memory?'

3 Yet such as us you made and meant just less than gods to be;
with honour and with glory, Lord, you crowned humanity.
And then dominion you bestowed for all made by your hand,
all sheep and cattle, birds and fish that move through sea or land

O Lord, our Lord, throughout the earth how glorious is your name!

Reading *2 Corinthians 13:11–13*

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Be restored; listen to my appeal; agree with one another; live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Sermon *Six Terrible Gods and the One We Actually Believe In*

I want to start by reassuring you: if you've ever struggled with faith, prayer, or God, there's a very good chance it's not because God is being

awkward or difficult. It may be because you've accidentally been believing in a badly imagined version of God. We do this all the time. We take bits of our own anxiety, favourite authority figures, workplace trauma, or political news cycle, and project them heavenwards. The doctrine of the Trinity exists largely to stop us doing exactly that. So here are six gods the Bible rejects, and here's how Trinity helps us see where we are going wrong.

1. God as Big Brother

Always watching. Always judging. Usually disappointed.

I suspect this is one of the most common ways people imagine God. God is the 24hr CCTV. Always watching. Always monitoring. God sees when you lose your temper. God notices the thoughts you don't share. God is particularly alert when you enjoy something a bit too much. Somewhere in heaven there's a red light that comes on whenever you do something that feels even the tiniest bit dodgy. Faith under this god feels tense. Prayer becomes careful. You start editing yourself before this god gets the chance to. You might behave yourself, but you won't relax. And you definitely won't be honest with this god. This image also does something subtle and damaging. It turns God's attention into a threat. Being seen feels unsafe. Which means vulnerability, confession, and trust all start to shrink.

The Trinity banishes this god.

Father, Son, and Spirit are not locked in mutual observation, waiting for one another to fail. God's inner life is not surveillance, but shared love. Within God there is trust, not suspicion. Delight, not monitoring. Presence, not policing. The Trinity tells us that God's way of seeing is not about catching us out, but about staying close. God looks at us the way love looks, not the way authority watches. Which means being known by God is not dangerous. It is the safest thing there is. God sees us not to control us, God sees us only because love pays attention.

2. God as the Lone Strongman

One voice. One will. No dissent.

This God rules alone. There is no consultation. Only declaration. Questions are seen as weakness. Disagreement is treated as disloyalty. If this God feels familiar, it's because we've watched human versions play out in real time. Leaders who claim only they can fix things. Leaders who mistake dominance for strength. Whether it's the bluster and bravado of Donald Trump or the tightly controlled power of Vladimir Putin, the pattern is the same: one man (yes, usually a man) at the centre, holding everything together by force. Project that image onto God, and faith becomes about obedience rather than love.

Trinity deposes this god.

In God, power is shared, not hoarded. The Father does not dominate the Son. The Spirit is not a junior partner. Even God does not rule alone. Which makes authoritarian versions of faith deeply un-Godlike.

3. God as a Bigger, Angrier Version of Us

Our worst traits, only gobbier and given a microphone.

This is the God who is permanently furious. Always offended. Always certain someone is to blame. This God loves anger because anger feels like strength. This God mistakes shouting for courage and outrage for truth. And again, this image feels familiar because we see human versions of it all the time. Figures who thrive on grievance. Who turn fear into fury and fury into identity. People like Tommy Robinson, whose public persona is fuelled by rage, simplification, and the need for an enemy. When that spirit gets projected onto God, faith becomes toxic. God is made into a divine amplifier for our resentments. Our fears gain moral authority. Our anger starts calling itself righteousness. God becomes less about love and more about permission to hate loudly.

Trinity overcomes this god.

Trinity reveals a God whose deepest reality is not rage but self-giving love. The Son takes human violence to the Cross. The Spirit works quietly, persistently, refusing to bully or coerce. The Father's instinct is not rage, but costly giving and patient waiting. God is not our anger with divine backing. God is love that refuses to become what it opposes. Whenever we are tempted to clothe our rage in religious language, Trinity steps in and says: "No. That may be loud. But it is not holy."

4. God as a Vending Machine

Insert prayer. Press button. Await outcome.

You pray. You ask nicely. You try to believe hard enough. And then you wait. If the thing you asked for happens, you quietly conclude that prayer works – and maybe you write a book about it! If it doesn't, you assume something went wrong in the process. Perhaps you didn't pray with enough faith. Perhaps you chose the wrong words. Perhaps someone else prayed better. This version of God turns prayer into a transaction. Put in the right request and the correct amount of sincerity, and something useful should drop out. The trouble with this god is not just that it produces disappointment. It produces anxiety. Prayer becomes high-stakes. Faith becomes performance. And when life brings suffering that no amount of prayer seems to shift, this god collapses under the weight of reality.

Trinity unplugs this god.

Trinity insists that God is not a system to be operated, but a relationship to be entered. Father, Son, and Spirit do not exchange services or manage outcomes. They share life. They give, receive, and remain present with one another. Prayer is not about controlling events. It is about being drawn into God's own life. Sometimes circumstances change. Sometimes they don't. But God is never reduced to a mechanism. Trinity frees us from the exhausting belief that everything depends on getting prayer exactly right. God is not waiting for the perfect

input. God is inviting relationship. Which means prayer can become honest again.

5. God as the Tribal Mascot

Loves our flag. Hates the same people we do.

This god is very invested in being on our side.

This god supports: our nation, our politics, our denomination. This god is deeply suspicious of everyone else. This god mostly exists to reassure us that we were right all along. Which is comforting, but spiritually catastrophic. Because once God is reduced to a mascot, faith becomes a badge and enemies become essential.

Trinity relegates this god.

Trinity already contains difference without division. God does not need outsiders to define insiders. Unity in God does not come from sameness or exclusion. It comes from love that makes room. The Trinitarian God does not need to shrink to fit our tribe.

6. God as the Absentee Landlord

Built the place. Left instructions. Rarely visits.

This God made the world, set the rules, and then stepped back. Prayer feels like leaving voicemails. Suffering goes unanswered. Mould infests the walls. People often say, "I believe in God, but I don't think God is very involved."

Trinity casts out this god.

Trinity insists on nearness. God comes among us in Christ. God remains with us through the Spirit. God is not watching from a distance. God's Kingdom is not remotely managed. God is always present, even in the mess.

Again and again, we remake God in our own anxious image. Trinity stands in the way and says, “No. God is not like that.” It does not solve the mystery of God. It protects us from worshipping power, anger, control, or absence. And when God is freed from those distortions, so are we. That freedom reshapes our faith, our communities, and our lives. Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*

Reginald Heber (1783-1826) Public Domain Courtesy of St Andrew's Cathedral & Choir, Sydney, Australia

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;
holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

2 Holy, holy, holy!
all the saints adore thee,
casting down their golden crowns
around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim
falling down before thee,
God from of old who
evermore shall be!.

3 Holy, holy, holy!
though the darkness hide thee,
though the sinful human eye
thy glory may not see,

only thou art holy,
there is none beside thee
perfect in power, in love,
and purity.

4 Holy, holy, holy!
Lord God almighty!
all thy works shall praise thy name
in earth and sky and sea;
holy, holy, holy!
merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons,
blessed Trinity.

Confession of Faith

**We believe in God, who is not alone,
but lives as shared love in living relationship.**

**We believe in Jesus Christ,
who shows us a God who gives,
forgives, and refuses domination.
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
who gathers, sustains, and draws us into communion.
We believe that we are made in God's image
to live together, to share power, and to resist fear with love.
We trust in the God of grace, love and fellowship. Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

God of relationship,
we pray for a world fractured by fear and power.
Where voices are silenced,
teach us to listen.
Where leaders rule by anger and force,
raise up communities shaped by shared wisdom and humility.
Where difference is treated as threat,
teach us the courage of hospitality.
We pray for the Church:
when we hoard power, soften us;
when we fear disagreement, steady us;
when we forget love, remind us who you are.
We pray for those who feel isolated,
those pushed to the margins,
those told they do not belong.
Draw them into circles of care,
and draw us outward to meet them.
God of grace, love, and fellowship,
hold us all in your shared life. Amen.

Hymn ***O Worship the King***

William Kethe (fl.1559-1594), Robert Grant (1779-1838)

Sung by by 250 voice Mass Choir for Classic Hymns album @ Hyderabad and used with their kind permission.

O worship the King
all glorious above;
O gratefully sing
His power and His love;
our shield and defender,
the Ancient of Days,
pavilioned in splendour
and girded with praise.

2 O tell of His might,
O sing of His grace,
whose robe is the light,
whose canopy space;
His chariots of wrath the deep
thunder clouds form,
and dark is His path
on the wings of the storm.

3 The earth with its store
of wonders untold,
almighty, thy power
hath founded of old;
hath stablished it fast
by a changeless decree,
and round it hath cast,
like a mantle, the sea.

4 Thy bountiful care
what tongue can recite?
it breathes in the air,
it shines in the light;
it streams from the hills,
it descends to the plain,
and sweetly distils in the
dew and the rain.

5 Frail children of dust
and feeble as frail,
in Thee do we trust,
nor find Thee to fail;
Thy mercies how tender,
how firm to the end!
our maker, defender,
redeemer, and friend.

6 O measureless might,
ineffable love,
while angels delight
to hymn Thee above,
Thy ransomed creation,
though feeble their lays,
with true adoration
shall sing to Thy praise.

Blessing

Go now in the shared life of God.

Resist fear with love. Resist domination with relationship.

Resist loneliness with community.

And may God, Source, Word, and Spirit,

hold you, guide you, and send you, today and always. Amen.

Closing Music *Prelude in D minor*

by JSB (1685 - 1750), 12 Little Preludes, Jenny Gill Crawley URC - 2021

Sources

All liturgical material by Phil Nevard

Thanks

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