

*John 16 vv 12-15*

A Muslim friend of mine, Fahmida, once said to me, ‘There is one God, and Mohammed is His prophet. How can you Christians worship three Gods and say that they are one?’

Indeed, in this very church an elderly woman who used to worship here said to John Cowie, then the Minister, ‘I get God, but why must you keep talking about Jesus? Let alone the Holy Spirit.’

Today is a good day to think of these things. Because today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday dedicated to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, God spoke of a Messiah whom he would send, and God also sometimes referred there to his Spirit. It is in the Gospel of St John, that Jesus similarly refers to God as having three dimensions. Just before his betrayal and death, after speaking to the disciples about God as his father, Jesus says:

‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 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. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.’

Here, in a few sentences Jesus refers to God as his Father, himself (implicitly) as the Son, and he promises the coming of the Holy Spirit.

My Muslim friend who doubted that God could be three persons and yet one, was being too literal. The Trinity has nothing to do with arithmetic. One God, One Lord, One Spirit, doesn’t mean three gods. It means the one and only God, expressed and experienced in three different ways.

This shouldn't be difficult to understand. After all, we are all individuals with one life, yet we express ourselves and will be experienced in a number of ways.

e.g When we lived here in Amsterdam, Paul, my husband, was known to some people as a habitu  of Caf  de Jaren and he played a board game there that he'd invented. My publishing colleagues knew him as my husband. Others only knew him as a voice on the world service of Radio Netherlands. But the game player, the husband and the radio announcer were not different people, they were all Paul.

No one person will get the whole picture of who we are. How much more then can this apply to God. These are some descriptions of God by hymn writers: 'Invisible... almighty, victorious'; 'a sea without a shore', 'strong mother God', 'Judge eternal,' , a God whose 'chariots of wrath deep thunder-clouds form.'

'Judge eternal.' 'Chariots of wrath.' How do you see God? Some of us are afraid of Him and His chariots of wrath. Some of us feel that God's love and attention must be earned; some of us feel in our hearts that God is controlling, that God has all the power, and is just waiting to punish us – rather than that God is love. But if we are afraid of God, we cannot love Him. Fear can make us suspicious and insecure; it affects our emotions and our behaviour.

God doesn't want us to cower away from Him in fear. God wants us to form a relationship with Him, with Him not just as our creator or origin, but as He reveals Himself as Son and Spirit. In yearning for us, for a relationship with us, God changed the power equation. From being primarily experienced as a distant creator, God *humbled* Himself to come to earth as a man, as Jesus. Jesus came to us to help us overcome our fear of God. God is perfect love, and that is Jesus' central message to us: that God loves us, unconditionally, and God desires our love, free from fear. When we go through deep darkness, it's a comfort that Jesus knows about it. When we're tempted, it's a comfort to know that Jesus was tempted. When we're deserted by friends, it's a comfort to know

that Jesus was deserted by his friends. When we suffer acute pain, it's a comfort to know that Jesus suffered agony. When we stop being active, for whatever reason, and have to become passive, reliant on others, on what may happen, it's a comfort to know that Jesus, too, had to endure what came to Him.

The purpose of Jesus in history was to help us understand more fully the nature of God and, in doing so, to show us by example what a life devoted to love should look like: Pray modestly and humbly, live justly, feed the hungry, look after the poor and wretched, love our neighbours as ourselves... So long as he was on earth, Jesus could do that in person, but once he was gone, people in future generations would want to know the true nature of God. And so Jesus promises that for all time and all people there will be on earth the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit that God planted inside us is like our breath. We're seldom aware of breath – except when meditating, or when we're failing - and yet it is essential to life. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God breathing in us, helping us to live a spiritual life. It's the Holy Spirit of God who prays in us, who offers us the gifts of love, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, peace and joy. It is the Holy Spirit which offers us the life that death cannot destroy.

So what *is* the Holy Spirit? On one level, it is simply another name for God. Try substituting the word 'God' every time the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the Bible. The sense of the words remains the same.

How about this definition, that I heard some years ago and have never forgotten: the Holy Spirit is to God what sunlight is to the sun. The sun is 95 million miles away, and yet we feel its warmth in our streets, in our gardens, through the windows of our homes. The Holy Spirit is God's radiance, the divine influence flowing into our lives and into our world.

Or another image, if you prefer: imagine the Holy Trinity of God as a plant. The Father is the deep root. The Son is the shoot that breaks out into the world. The Spirit is the flowers and fruit of the plant which spread beauty,

fragrance and food. So, these flowers and fruit: what are they? In St Paul's words, they are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness. How are we doing with these in our lives?