

Divine Arithmetic

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Lawrence Peak**

Divine Arithmetic

Today is Trinity Sunday and like me, you might be a little uncertain as to what that really means – does this mean one God, or three Gods? Does this mean a three-headed God? What are we really talking about here? Is this true or is this a nonsense invented by the early church. And yet, in a somewhat mysterious way The Trinity is trying to encapsulate the different but very real experiences we have of our God.

Look at the stars and the galaxies and all the majestic beauty of the universe and the wonders of creation, and the beautiful world we live in with all its astonishing and awe-inspiring intricacies – and we know for sure that God the creator exists with an unbelievable attention to beauty and detail.

- Look at the life of Jesus, his teaching and his sacrifice.
- Look at the way he stands so far above any other human being in history.
- Look at the way he gives us that warm loving caring nurturing picture of God,
- Look at the way he speaks in such an intimate fashion to his Father
- and we know we are seeing God in Jesus.

And when we feel the Spirit of God pulsing through our very veins and inner being, inspiring, emboldening, comforting and encouraging us, we know that this too is real – as the disciples at Pentecost knew that what they were experiencing was very real. It's all real !!

Forget the complicated theology, forget the doublespeak (or in this case triplespeak) and forget the dodgy arithmetic that tells us that three into one won't go.

These things are real. These experiences are very real. You know, the Muslims criticise us for worshipping three gods. They claim that the divine arithmetic we believe in says $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ and they ridicule us for this. As we shall see, in actual fact it is quite the contrary; we believe and can come to know one wonderful loving, caring multi-faceted God whom we can experience in so many ways.

We could be tempted to say that Jesus was a very holy and inspirational teacher. A very wise guru but no more! And yet when we read the gospels closely we find that we must go further. The Bible won't let us leave it at that.

His claim that

“Before Abraham was, I am” as recorded in John’s Gospel chapter 8 - implies that he was indeed timeless as is God himself. And in the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John Chapter 17 when he is emphasising his unity with his Father and summarising his position in eternity he states

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.”

And the book of Revelation ascribes a very honoured place to him in the glory of heaven.

Jesus was also very explicit about the coming of the Holy Spirit as a real person to be with us and sustain us in so many ways as we try to live our day to day lives. And this we celebrated last Sunday at Pentecost.

The doctrine of the Trinity was only formalised at the Council of Nicaea (now part of modern Turkey) in 325 AD – quite a while after the time of Jesus. Here the early church was trying to encapsulate and make sense of this mysterious doctrine. As a result of all their labours we now have the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:

By the power of the Holy Spirit

he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;

he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and
apostolic Church.*

*We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to
come. Amen.*

This is quite a statement of our belief and so much learning, prayer and devotion from so many theologians must have gone into assembling this document. Nevertheless people still struggle over the concept of three Gods and yet only one! It is the most holy, the most revered, and yet the most confusing doctrine of our faith!

As a consequence there have been many attempts to give examples where this concept may apply in everyday life. All of these are bound to fall short of a reality that we cannot fully describe – and yet many are helpful as long as we realise that these analogies are all limited.

The famous example from St Patrick of Ireland has been the shamrock with its three petals and yet in its unity it is only one flower. A similar example has been the humble pretzel consisting of three distinct areas bound together to make a single biscuit.

Perhaps a better example comes from the various roles that we ourselves play in life. I am a husband, father and uncle amongst other things, yet I am only one person. Three hats indeed, although I don't know how good I would be at wearing them all simultaneously – at the same instant - a husband, a father and an uncle. I guess it might be possible in some circumstances – for example if their safety was being threatened , or there was some other common need!

The Bible teaches clearly that there is a strong and constant interaction between Father Son and Holy Spirit. So much so that there is blurring to the point where they cannot be separate. God was very present in the life and times of Jesus and is very present when the Holy Spirit leads us strengthens us and encourages us.

The best analogy for me is that of water which we know can exist as vapour (steam), liquid water and frozen ice - yet it is always of the same essence H₂O. One of the troubles with this analogy is that it would seem as if you can only have one or the other of these phases vapour liquid or solid. However there is a single point called the triple point where solid liquid and vapour co-exist simultaneously. It is at a definite temperature and pressure and is a single point. 0.01 degrees celsius (273,16K) and 4.58 mm of mercury(611.2 Pa). At this point you cannot say what it is! Slightly change the temperature or pressure and it changes into one of the dominant phases but at the triple point you cannot say what it is except that it has the molecular structure H₂O – all of the same essence.

So instead of saying 1 +1 +1 we should be emphasising this strong internal and constant interaction by saying 1 x 1 x 1 and of course that answer is **ONE**.

There are quite a few aspects of our faith which we cannot understand. Like Paul, who said so profoundly we see now as through a glass darkly. And we must wait for the time when all will become clear. Our brains are not equipped to take in all eternal matters in all their glory. However that does not preclude us from drawing benefit from our faith.

I would guess most of us do not understand the ins and outs of how a television set works, or the complications of the modern cars we drive. Nevertheless that does not stop us using these wonderful aids to our modern living to draw enjoyment and relaxation from them. Think how our modern cars have improved the efficiency of our day to day routine – and yet most of us would not have many clues if they break down. Even the NRMA have trouble with some of these sophisticated systems.

As we said earlier we can meet our God in so many ways and at so many times. We can stare in wonder at the whole universe or the intricate design that we see in the world of nature. We can feel God very present in the presence of a spectacular sunrise or sunset.

We can feel the hand of God when we learn from the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the way this Gospel speaks to us in human and understandable terms – in terms we can understand.

And we can feel God very close when his Spirit surrounds, comforts, strengthens and inspires us.

No we do not worship three Gods; rather we worship one God who comes to us and surrounds us in so many amazing ways.

And a short Celtic poem to finish with

Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,

Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair;

Three leaves of the shamrock, yet only one shamrock to wear;

Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share

Three Persons in God: to one God alone we make our prayer

Amen