

For nearly two thousand years theologians have been telling us that the Trinity is a mystery too deep for our understanding; but that hasn't stopped them from writing endless books about it. None of them are my bedtime reading, I shamefully admit.

The dogma of the Trinity wasn't there from the very beginning of Christianity: it was hammered out – above all by the Council of Nicea in the 4th century. When the Apostles' Creed came to be written down some time later, they weren't quite sure what to say about the Holy Spirit, so they said almost nothing. It is the Nicene Creed that we say every Sunday at Mass and it drives home the Son's equality with the Father – 'Light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father'. This was to counteract the teaching of Arius, who said the Son was 'inferior' to the Father, a sort of 'secondary god' and a created being. The dogma of the Trinity slowly took shape over many centuries. It was never there from the beginning,

There are lots of ways that we can try to think about the mystery of the Trinity – even though 95% of us don't. I was taught that God the Father is the Creator, God the Son is the Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier; but this doesn't always make it easy to hang on to the essential unity and oneness of God – which is probably something else that the majority of ordinary, everyday Christians like you and me don't think about very much. It

sometimes makes prayer a little confusing. though. For example: Do we pray to the Father *without* Jesus coming into the prayer? Do we pray to Jesus without any reference to the Father? Do we pray in any way to God *except* to and through Jesus? And where does the Holy Spirit come in? It can all get a bit muddled – well, it can for me.

It would actually be much easier if there was just God the Father and Jesus; however, revelation teaches that he is a Trinity of three Persons in one Godhead – something we couldn't have worked out for ourselves if he hadn't told us (which is what 'revelation' means) – so we can't really do much about it.

Mr Brown is married with two children. He is a policeman. He also does voluntary work with disabled people at a local day centre near where he lives. There is only *one* Mr Brown. However, to his wife he is a loving and faithful husband; to his children he is a strong, caring father; to a burglar he is someone to be avoided at all costs; to the disabled people at the day centre he is a dependable friend. Yet there is only *one* Mr Brown.

In the same way you could say that God is One, absolutely and indivisibly One. However, as the God who created all that exists, he is the Father; as the God who redeems us in Jesus Christ, he is the Son; and as the God who sanctifies and recreates us in his own likeness, he is the Holy Spirit. Or to put it another way: *because* God created all that exists, he is the Father; *because* God

redeemed us in Jesus Christ, he is the Son; and *because* God sanctifies and recreates us in his own likeness, he is the Holy Spirit. I have an idea that this way of looking at the Trinity was condemned as heretical many centuries ago, because it implies that God is only a Trinity in what he *does*, not in who he is. However, I'm not going to lose too much sleep over that, on the principle of 'if it helps, I'll use it.' Over the centuries people have come up with all kinds of metaphors and analogies for the Trinity; for example:

- An egg consists of three parts – shell, yolk and white – but it is a single whole...
- Water which can come in three forms – liquid, ice and steam – but it remains water...
- St Patrick used the example of the shamrock...
- In seminary we had a lethal feast-day cocktail called 'the Trinity', which was one part gin, one part Dubonnet, and one part Martini rosso...
- And St Augustine likened the Trinity to mind, knowledge and love in the human person – which is not quite so interesting as gin-and-Dubonnet.

I don't think our lives will be radically changed by any of this and I doubt that it will turn any of us into theologians or mystics. Actually, I withdraw the second half of that statement: we are all born mystics, created for the highest mystical understanding and experience – but somehow, in some sadly unsurprising way, life gets in the way. What did Jesus say about it in the gospel of Mark?

“Others hear the word, but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it dies.”

(Mark 4: 18-19)

Meister Eckhart was a German Dominican born in the 13th century, and he was probably one of the greatest mystics of all time; he was also extremely intelligent, superbly educated, well-read and learned. However, with all his mysticism and intelligence and with all his education, he said this: “God can never be understood by the mind, he can only be loved by the heart. The moment you try to understand him with your mind, you have lost him; the moment you try to love him with your heart, you have found him.”

We are taught that the Trinity is a mystery which can never be understood; this means that we aren't required or even *meant* to understand it – only to receive it. Receiving is not the same as understanding. If your child says to you: “Mummy, Daddy, I love you” – would you try to understand that, or would you simply receive it with joy? We don't need cleverness or intelligence to receive the mystery of the Trinity – in fact, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said that God has hidden his mysteries from the learned and the clever. We need only love.