Today on Trinity Sunday we celebrate the great truth of our faith – that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Countless sermons will be preached up and down the land (often by curates and lay ministers as the vicar mysteriously decides that it’s their turn this week!) laying out images and metaphors – St Patrick’s shamrock with its three leaves in one plant; the sun with its disc, rays and motes; springs flowing into rivers and into canals; dancers joined together in the dance; H2O found as ice, water and steam co-existing at the triple point. Often they will flirt with the heresies of modalism, partialism and subordinationism, as they try to show that it’s possible to conceive of three in one and one in three without breaking our basic understanding of the universe. Fundamentally though, the Trinity is not a maths problem!

Indeed, three in one and one in three is probably the least important thing to contemplate in the Trinity. One of my favourite fourth-century saints, Gregory of Nyssa, left us a whole host of images to help our feeble understandings grope towards some insight into the divine life. And what is striking is that several of his metaphors explicitly don’t focus on the potential three-ness of God. He sometimes talks of Father, Son and Spirit as like links in a chain – you pull on one and the others follow, whether you intended them to or not. He wants to remind us that the Scriptures are always a Trinitarian drama – sometimes one person, the Father, the Son or the Spirit, may seem to be the focus, the key agent in a story, but all three are equally involved. It may only be made explicit and obvious at key points, like Jesus’ conception, his baptism, his transfiguration – but the same Trinitarian drama must be read just as centrally in our understanding of Isaiah’s ecstasy while the glory of the Lord filled the temple; or in St John’s vision on Patmos of the heavenly court bowing before the throne. It’s not the Father who creates and then sits down for a bit of a rest, while the Son gets on with redeeming until the ascension, when it’s the Spirit’s turn to work. Rather, like links in a
chain, all three persons work together inseparably in creation, redemption and sanctification.

Similarly, Gregory talks of the persons of the Trinity as like the *four colours* of the rainbow. Now those of you who, like me, grew up in twentieth-century England rather than fourth-century may well be thinking, ‘Richard of York gave battle in vain – surely there are seven colours in the rainbow!’ The culture of our science moves on. But crucially Gregory’s metaphor still works because he wasn’t focusing on the *number* of the colours but rather the insight, as true now as it was then – that there are no *gaps* in a rainbow. As the light is refracted, there is no separation between the wavelengths across the spectrum. What Gregory was pointing us to is that there’s more at stake here than the question of number – we need to understand the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. That they interact and yet work inseparably with a single will.

If we make today a matter of maths we will end up like the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, declaring that, “Absolutely nothing worthwhile for the practical life can be made out of the doctrine of the Trinity taken literally.” And yet, nothing could be further from the truth – for in this mystery of the three persons we are shown the fundamental importance of love and relationship. We learn the character of God and the life into which he calls us.

The Trinity is not simply some Platonic ideal of a perfect triadic structure beyond us foolishly invented by philosophers but rather a scripturally-warranted relationship that actively draws us in, that stirs us up, that calls us into fullness of being – for we are made and remade in the image of God. There are, as St Augustine once noted, ‘traces of the Trinity’ in the very depths of our being – God has left his fingerprints upon us. And it is only as we contemplate the truth of God’s being as Trinity more deeply, that we can understand and be remade in our own being more deeply; and vice versa in a spiralling process of becoming and growing into the image of God. *Noverim me, noverim te.*

Today maths metaphors cannot help us; for, whatever truth they may hold, they only aid us in believing *about* one God. Yet our celebration, the words of the Creed we have said together call us to something fundamentally different to believe *in* one God.

Believing *about* something is abstract, impersonal. A simple matter of true or false, right and wrong. I believe we’ve got two candles on the altar. But if I turn round and check and find there are suddenly six in some Anglo-Catholic reordering, well I’ll have been wrong but I won’t really care. In the great scheme of things, it simply wouldn’t matter.
But believing in something – well, that’s a different matter. I’d have to be pretty daft to believe in two candles but if I did then it would be at the heart of things, it would define everything about me and how I saw the world.

Believing in God as Trinity goes to the heart of love and relationships. If God were just an abstract reality, then he might command us to love but love would really be only a human thing. Love would be something evolved, earthly and forever imperfect. But if God is three persons in relationship and has been since before the creation of space and time, then he defines love. Indeed, God is nothing other than self-sacrificial love. God as Trinity not only is love and the source of love but he loves. And as that love of the Father is poured out in self-sacrifice to the Son, making the Son who he is, there is nothing else left; nothing kept back or preserved, creating a difference between the one and the other. They are co-equal, consubstantial persons. So too the Son, seeing what the Father does, pours out all that he is in self-sacrificial love. God as Trinity is love, a love that is dynamic; a love that is more than an ideal but in its perfection can love us and invite us into that love, into the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. Indeed, we discover in Paul’s reflections to the Romans, that it is only because the self-sacrificial love of the Spirit pours itself out within us to the Father through the Son in “sighs too deep for words”, that we too can begin to love and to pray and to be drawn into the divine life.

We will never fully understand God as Trinity – for as our former member John Wesley once said, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.” Like Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died, the glory of the Lord fills the temple, overwhelming our limited senses and transcending even our highest thoughts. But as we grasp the hem of the garment of God and contemplate the mystery, we are not reaching for a sterile maths problem to be wrestled with but towards the fullness of Love that reaches out, draws us in and takes us up. Today and every day let us make the Trinity the start of prayers, the ground of our hopes, and the model of our love.

And so we pray the morning prayer of our Orthodox brothers and sisters:

Having risen from sleep, we worship you, blessed God, and sing to you, mighty Lord, the angelic hymn: Holy, holy, holy are you, O God; through the prayers of the Theotokos, have mercy on us. Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.