

## **Ilston Service 2025**

### **‘All praise and thanks to God’:**

#### **The Nicene Creed and contemporary Wales**

It's hardly usual for Christians – even keen and committed Christians – to give much thought to the Doctrine of the Trinity, that, according to the formula, the Christian God (your God and mine) is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For most of us, even the mention of the word theology can be intimidating. We either believe that it's too difficult or too complex or else that it's irrelevant to our every day lives. Surely, isn't Christianity simple? Cannot even a child understand it? There you have God in heaven who has created us and who loves us; there you have Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son whose birth we celebrated again this Christmas, having come among to share that love even unto death; and then there's the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Pentecost, who has makes Christ (having returned to his Father in heaven) a living reality in our experience. We yes! In its essence that *is* the Doctrine of the Trinity. It's straightforward and logical and you don't need a university degree in order to understand it. It's got nothing to do with mathematics – how can One be Three and Three be One; and it's not a complex philosophical problem. It has to do, rather, with the church's experience down the ages: that there is but one God, the creator, who has come among us fully and finally in Jesus Crist his Son; that the Son is more than a prophet and a good man – he *is* a prophet and *a* good man, but he is more than that; when you come face to face with Jesus you come face to face with God; ‘The Father and I are one; he who has seen me has seen the Father’); and through the Spirit it all becomes a living reality in the church's experience from generation to generation all down the centuries. It's not a conundrum or a debating point but something to glory in and be thankful for. In the words of Martin Rinkhart:

All praise and thanks to God, the Father now be given;

The Son and Spirit blest who reign in highest heaven;

The one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore;  
And thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

That having been said, it took a long time for the church to formulate its creed and come up with what we now call ‘the Doctrine of the Trinity’. There is no formal doctrine of the trinity in the New Testament though the raw materials or the building blocks are apparent on every page. In the days of his flesh, it became obvious to the disciples (according to the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke), that the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father was so close as to be unique. He was not only obedient to the Father in all things, but he did the sort of things that only God could be expected do. He would pray to God unceasingly though no one ever heard him praying for forgiveness of sins. He never asked for forgiveness, but it was he who would forgive others, and only God could do that. Again and again and again he says to the poor, the afflicted, those who have been worn down by their cares ‘Your sins have been forgiven’. There’s no wonder that the Pharisees and the scribes accused him of blasphemy. And didn’t Thomas later confess: ‘My Lord and my God’. There was only one God, the creator, the heavenly Father, but somehow there was this man, the wandering rabbi from Nazareth, the son of Joseph the carpenter, who was acting as though he were God! In the words of the centurion in Matthew’s Gospel, reflecting the church’s faith down the ages: ‘He surely was the Son of God’.

But what of the Holy Spirit? For this we must turn from the synoptic gospels to the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John. It’s John who records the relation between Jesus, his heavenly Father, and the Spirit who had brooded over the waters of creation at the very beginning and had been active ever since. In instructing the disciples in the Upper Room at the beginning of Holy Week, Jesus spoke not only of his relationship with the Father but referred to the work and ministry of the Spirit.

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. (John 16: 12-15)

This is not so much the Doctrine of the Trinity, but this is the raw material from which the doctrine was fashioned. The one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But what happened at the end of Holy Week? He was crucified, died and was buried and on the third day he rose again. Thereafter he returned to the company of his disciples and gave them the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of time (Mt. 28: 18-20)

And the next thing that happens is Pentecost, the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit, the first Christian sermon given by Peter which is all about Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, and that his blood was on their hands:

Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Then follows the challenge, to repent and to believe:

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:36-8)

Like the people of the Old Testament, the Christians of the early church, both Jews and gentiles, believed that there was but one God, the creator and

redeemer, but it now seemed as though that one God had revealed himself fully and finally in the Lord Jesus: ‘This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased’ (Mt. 3:17), and that this one God incarnate in Christ had become a constant reality in their experience through the medium of the Spirit. It was from this reality, and on the basis of this experience, that the doctrine of the trinity was forged, and when we turn to the Letters of Paul and the other apostles, we see this process being worked out: One God who is known now as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while the Spirit is not some impersonal force but known as a divine person in his own right.

The Revd Simeon Baker, in a committee a few months ago, suggested that we should take the Nicene Creed as the theme for this year’s Ilston service. Were people to listen in this evening, they would be highly surprised to find Welsh Baptists (of all people!) discussing a document written seventeen hundred years ago in a city in Turkey across the isthmus from Istanbul, by a group of bishops convened by the Emperor Constantine. The year was 325. By then the Christian faith had spread throughout the ancient world as far as Britain. This was centuries before the Saxons arrived, before the Welsh language had emerged – the tongue spoken by the inhabitants was Brythonic – and a century and a half before Saint David and his colleagues, Illtud and Teilo, Deiniol, Beuno and the rest, turned the newly-minted Welsh into a Christian nation.

Why were the bishops called together? Some 13 years earlier Constantine had a vision of the cross along with the words *in hoc signo vinces* (‘in this sign you will conquer’) and had decided that from now on Christianity would become the official religion of the Roman Empire. In order to secure unity within the empire there needed to be unity in the church. For a generation and more the Christians had been debating among themselves and asking the question ‘what sort of a God do we have?’, and ‘what is the nature of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son’?

To cut a long story short and to omit the technicalities, the Arian party (called after a man called Arius, a clergyman from Alexandria) stated that as there was only one God, Christ – although called the Son of God – did not share God’s very essence, while the Word of God, the Logos, who would in the fulness of time become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, was in fact a creature – a created being – the greatest in God’s creation but a creature nevertheless. The term which was used was *homoiousios* with the ‘i’, meaning *like* God but not sharing in God’s very essence or being. The other party led by Athanasius, the secretary to the bishop of Alexandria, insisted that this was not the case: ‘No, no, no!’. The Word of God was not *like* God but in fact *was* God, sharing fully in the divine nature; he was not *homoiousios* (like God) with the ‘i’, but *homoousios*, God himself. The eternal Logos or Word *was* eternal, he had had always existed even before time began, and it was not as a creature that the Word had identified himself with Jesus of Nazareth but fully as God, as God in his very essence. Had not John the Evangelist stated in the prologue of his gospel?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, ***and the Word was God***. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:1-3)

Thus it was decided in the Council of Nicea:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty,  
Maker of all things visible and invisible,

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,  
begotten of the Father, that is of the essence of the Father,  
God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God,  
begotten, not made;

of the same essence – *homoousios* – as the Father.

Through whom all things were made ...

And then the creed moves on to describe the incarnation of Christ, human salvation through the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and the coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead with only a single sentence on the Holy Spirit.

The controversy did not end there. Although the creed was accepted as the church's official formulation, Arianism remained popular for at least a generation while Athanasius was forced to flee. It was during this time that the famous saying *Atanasius contra mundum* ('Athanasius against the world') was coined. However, by mid-century it dawned on the church that were Arius's views in fact correct and if the Logos or Word was merely a creature, it followed that Jesus was only a man and *not* the Son of God, and if so, there could be no salvation. To be saved at all, humankind needed to be saved by God – not someone *like* God but God himself. When the next church council was convened in Constantinople in 381, the Nicene creed was reaffirmed and a paragraph referring to the Holy Spirit was added. If the Son shared the divine nature with the Father, surely the same must be true of the Spirit:

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life.  
He proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

It was through this that the Doctrine of the Trinity was formulated to become normative for the church throughout the world.

But where does that leave us as Baptists? Unlike the Anglicans, the Catholics and the Orthodox, we do not recite the creed in worship, while our only stated creed is the earliest one: 'Jesus is Lord'. That being said, we have all been

baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and were we to unpack it, the simple phrase ‘Jesus is Lord’ – which conveys both Christ’s deity and his humanity – leads logically and emphatically to the Doctrine of the Trinity. Far from being an heretical sect, the Baptist Union of Wales is a small though not insignificant part of Christ’s Body, the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic church. Since the days of John Myles, through the 1689 Confession of Faith, culminating in the Union’s Declaration of Principle

That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures,

we have been trinitarians, and trinitarians – I hope – we shall remain. That is why we can join with our fellow Christians throughout the world in giving thanks for the Nicene Creed.