

Romans 5:1-5

God's eternal community of love

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In every confirmation class I've taught, the lesson on the Trinity has always been the most challenging and the most entertaining. And usually, at the end of the lesson, I ask the kids if they're confused, and invariably they say "yes", and I say, "good". The reason I say this is that God's nature is utterly different to our human nature. If we think we can fully understand it, then we're either deluding ourselves or we are reducing God to something much less than the author of all creation. Teaching the Trinity is not about us being able to completely understand how God is both three and one, but it's about understanding how we are in relationship with a God who is love.

Usually talking about the Trinity is enough to cause the eyes of many Christians to glaze over. Surely we can just put it in the too-hard basket and just worry about all the other stuff in the bible. If we do bother to deal with it, it's in the form of an analogy. But usually, analogies fall apart pretty quickly, and this is certainly true when it comes to our Triune God.

You may have heard the classic one of the three-leaf clover. The persons of the Trinity are like the three leaves, and together they form one clover. But the problem with this is if you only have one leaf, you don't have a clover. But the witness of scripture is that with the Holy Spirit we receive the fullness of God, with Jesus we receive the fullness of God, and with the Father we receive the fullness of God. If you take just one person of the Trinity you do have God. Not so with the clover; one leaf doesn't make a whole clover. We have the same problem with using an egg or an apple, or whatever else you've heard that can be divided into three parts.

The other main trap we fall into with our Trinity analogies is best seen in the H₂O version. The Trinity is like water; water has three states: solid, liquid, and gas. Although the water changes form it is always still H₂O. This analogy denies the distinction of the persons within the Trinity. The problem is that no one molecule of H₂O can actually exist as solid, liquid, and gas at the same time. Yet God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all at once.

What's much more helpful than these analogies is talking about the Trinity in relational terms. This is what we get in today's epistle reading from Romans. We have peace in our relationship with God because of Jesus. We know God's love for us through the Holy Spirit filling our hearts. How we relate to God is bound up in God's triune nature.

Within the godhead there is an eternal community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, existing forever in a relationship of love. And we are invited into that eternal community, to share in God's love. And the Father sends the Son to make that possible. And the Son promises the Holy Spirit would be given to assure us of our place in God's kingdom.

Now the point of Romans 5 isn't to explain the Trinity to us. The start of this chapter is the bridge between two very distinct parts of Paul's letter. In chapters one to four, Paul lays out what God has done for us. We read about the universal human problem of sin, and that all people have fallen short of the glory of God. Then we read about God's response, the righteousness we now have in Christ, and our justification by faith.

But of course, it doesn't just end there. Starting here in chapter five, St Paul now answers the question "Now what?". Now that we are justified by grace through faith, what happens next? How do we live our lives as sinners made righteous in God's sight? According to today's passage, the life of the justified is a mix of peace, hope, suffering, and love.

All this happens as we live in relationship with our triune God. We have peace with God through Christ, and because of this we have hope and we live in his love. But this doesn't remove us from problems and trials. And any suffering brings endurance and character, which produce hope, and this hope does not disappoint. And it doesn't disappoint because of the triune God, because the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, has been given to us and gives us God's love.

We hear more about the work of the Spirit in Romans 8, which tells us about the Spirit interceding on our behalf as struggle to find the right words to pray. But we're also reminded that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is a fulfilment of prophecy. In Joel chapter two we read of a new era where God's Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. And so, we may rejoice in the midst of suffering because we know that it is temporary. A new era, another chapter has begun, and the future for which we hope is already changing the way we live. Pentecost has happened, the promised Holy Spirit has been given, and we live as God's own people, living in hope and joy and love.

Yes, there may also be suffering. And sometimes we are tempted to think that our suffering proves we are outside of God's favour. In the book of Job, we see this suggested several times by Job's so-called friends. But we have been justified through Christ. God does not lack favour towards us but makes us righteous by Christ's faithfulness. Just a few verses beyond today's text we read, "While we were sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

God has shown grace and mercy and boundless generosity towards us, inviting us into relationship, inviting us into community, into an eternal community that is bound up in the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this reminds us that we are all connected in some way. None of us lives completely isolated from one another. We live on the same earth, breathe the same air, and rely on the same ground to produce food. We are inseparably connected to one another, and to God's good creation.

Our God is an eternal community, and has created community, and calls us into community. Sin and death tear at the bonds that hold us together, but nothing can tear apart God, not even our poor attempts at explaining the Trinity through analogies. God's love is eternal, God's unity is eternal, and God brings us into eternity through the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, giving salvation and uniting us in the faith.

This is why we celebrate Trinity Sunday, this is why rejoice when talking about three in one, and this is why it's okay to be quite confused when trying to explain how that is at all possible. What's most important is the good news of salvation and forgiveness and grace and mercy and peace and righteousness and justification and however else you want to describe our relationship with our Triune God. So thanks be to God that we are saved not through comprehending the mysteries of the Trinity, but through faith, through trusting in God's work of salvation for us, and living thus at peace with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.