

Trinity Sunday (Year C)

A door into the mystery of God – and something about kittens

It's sometimes said that the Feast of the Holy Trinity is the only celebration in the church year devoted to a doctrine. What's more, it's one that can land a preacher in a theological quagmire. A posting on Facebook reads, 'How not to commit heresy preaching on the Trinity: Say nothing and show pictures of kittens instead.'

At first glance the Trinity does look like a theological statement. A *Catechism*, in the back of our Prayer Book, describes it: 'God is eternal, earth maker, pain bearer, life giver; source of all that is and shall be; father and mother of us all. We learn that God is one, yet revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – a Holy Trinity.'

The Trinity is an image – a description in words – by which we identify God. But let's not limit ourselves to that. The fundamental difference between Trinity Sunday and other celebrations is that today we focus on who God *is* rather than on what God *does*. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost – all tell a sacred story. But today we turn to the sacred itself, and the spotlight falls on who God is, pure and not so simple – and it's not so simple because who God is, is a mystery.

We tend to regard mysteries as something unintelligible – like a puzzle that has to be worked out. But the Trinity isn't like that. It's not like a detective story that we can figure out if we unearth enough clues. Rather, it's like doors that open up on another realm and lead us into a deeper and richer reality.

When we open a door that leads into mystery, we need to be aware that while something of our experience can be put into words, the words can never fully express the experience. Words are limited because with a mystery there's always more than meets the eye. A mystery is something that we encounter but never fully understand.

Christian life is loaded with mystery. We're sharing in a mystery right now – namely, the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a door through which God's grace flows and through which we experience God's love and nourishment. Bread and wine that are placed on the altar express many truths and realities that words can never totally express. They bring us gifts of grace that no theological statement can ever fully encapsulate. This doesn't mean that we give up trying to understand or communicate these truths, though our efforts are much like translating poetry into prose.

All 'God talk' (which is what 'theology' means) ultimately runs into mystery. And when we encounter mystery, we come to a point where we find that only faith and wonder can really operate. Lovers know the truth of this. They spend time talking about their love, whispering endearments, writing romantic poems, but there comes a stage when talk no longer suffices. All that will satisfy the mystery of their love is to be in the other's presence.

There are always limitations to our theological understandings and talking. For example, how can we explain how bread and wine can also be the body and blood of Christ. It's the same when we try to 'explain' the Trinity. So today I suggest we treat the Trinity much like we regard the bread and wine of the Eucharist – as something to be experienced rather than analysed – as a doorway through which we enter into God's presence.

What might we find when we open this door? In our God talk we describe the One we worship as being shown to us as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – yet as one God. That tells us that it's the very nature of God to be in relationship. An early Christian writer described God as love. God,

he said, *is love*, and love can only exist and have meaning in relationship. And so, at the very heart of who God is, there's relationship. Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, said:

The difficulty, if it be a difficulty, about the Trinitarian doctrine is not the difficulty of a mathematical puzzle, but simply the difficulty of comprehending a love that goes so deep. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are one in the oneness of love beyond all our understanding, though that love has touched us and we have tasted of it in the coming in Jesus, and in the operations of the Holy Spirit in us and for us.

The Trinity leads us into the mystery of the profoundest love. We're relational beings. Knowledge and love of one person for another is what gives life true meaning and purpose. The Trinity reveals to us that this personal relationship, this knowledge and love between persons, also exists in who God is, and that God desires to share it with us.

As humans we find our fulfilment and purpose when, as Paul puts it, we have access to God's grace, and we share in the glory of God. We discover our destiny and meaning to life when we know that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'

Every Eucharist is an act of thanksgiving, and at every Eucharist we have one primary reason for giving thanks: that is, for the mystery of love that the Trinity reveals to us. The Trinity opens up a door into the mystery of who God is, and it's for this that we give thanks. Thanks for One in whose presence we find grace – not fear, not vengeance or retribution – but the sheer, undeserved, unearned, unmerited, incredible kindness of the One who is Love.

I mentioned earlier the suggestion that it might be safer for me to show pictures of kittens today. When, some time ago, I reposted that suggestion on Facebook, one of my stepdaughters, who like me is given to felines, offered a comment that I thought contained some real wisdom:

Why do kittens suddenly need to zoom wildly around the house at top speed at four in the morning, at some point inevitably jumping on top of someone and probably knocking over something? Why are there clothes-pegs on the dining chairs, instead of in the clothes-peg basket in the laundry? These are mysteries that human minds simply can never comprehend. Our job is simply to love, as we are loved so unconditionally. Even when we step on their little tails and they do the yelp, they still love us. Even when dinner is a whole '10 minutes late' and they have been crying out for Justice/ Jelly-meat, they still love us.

She suggests that's a possible metaphor for our experience of the Trinity. The Trinity is a mystery for us to experience – a mystery that takes us into the presence of God who is love – who, for reasons that are beyond our comprehension, loves us unconditionally. All the words we use trying to describe all this, can only hint at what this mystery contains. Our offering of thanks and praise can only be a token compared to what God gives to us in love.

I believe we're being invited to walk through the doorway into the mystery of who God is, and to discover what's being offered to us. And so, to the Trinity of love who made us, who loves us, who sustains us, we give praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour, power and might, forever and ever. Amen.

*Alister Hendery
Preached at Waiapu Cathedral – 15.6.2025*