

## 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020 10am Trinity Sunday

Talk by Andrew Attwood, additional thoughts by Val Whiteman

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### **Talk**

[Andrew Attwood:]

It's intriguing. I was just asking folks early before we were starting this service how many weeks have we now been in lockdown? I think this is our 12th, which is pretty intense really, and yet God appears to be doing something with us that is deep, that is important. We've already mentioned it this morning, and I've said it a number of times in previous weeks, that it seems that God is drawing us closer to himself, people are feeling called to draw near to God. But on this Trinity Sunday it seems good to ask the question, "Drawing near to whom? Drawing near to what kind of God?" or "What does that mean?" Maybe as you've been praying a little more or studying a little more, or being open to God's presence a little bit more, you are growing in your sense of who that is drawing me to. But we need to dive in further, we need to understand how big and how wide and how deep and how high, and how wonderfully rich the God is that we're drawing near to. Lindsey's read this very familiar line out to us from 2 Corinthians 13:

<sup>14</sup> May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

From very early on, people like Paul were using a triune kind of blessing to describe what they understood about God and he says, "... be with you all" - some knowledge of Jesus, some knowledge of God the Father, some experience and knowledge of the Holy Spirit. This is an 'everybody thing' that Paul the Apostle is wanting us to move towards. And this is a huge revelation. This is new. This is sweet. This is the most beautiful invitation into something that wasn't known fully before.

It's for sure that there were clues, all the way back in the early parts of the Bible, the Trinity was kind of hinted at. If you go all the way back to Genesis, right at the beginning of the creation accounts, you will hear just prior to the creation of human beings, God says, "Let Us make them in Our image." Let Us make them in Our image. What an intriguing thing for the Mosaic tradition to be writing down. Even when Moses, who follows on with the commandments later from the mountain of Sinai, says there's one God, "there is one God and you shall have no other gods before me." And yet, even prior to that commandment there was a hint that there was something further and wider and deeper about this one God, because the Bible is explicit all the way through: 'one God', but something that is broader and wider than simply one.

Think of it this way. Think of three waves. I don't know how many of you are missing the opportunity to go travelling or maybe get to the coast, but think of three waves on a beach, and think of yourself standing on the edge where the water is beginning to come in, it just repeatedly comes in and imagine a reasonably big wave washing in. And it kind of catches you around your ankles and there's something refreshing about that first wave. And you know how the waves get sucked back into the sea and then it curls up again and it's thrown again with a second wave. And it's bigger and stronger this time. And imagine that wave sucking away from you. And it curls up even bigger and crashes much bigger and more intensely over you. That's kind of a way of thinking about how

the revelation of God has increased and increased and increased through the story of Scripture.

You see the Father revealed himself to Abraham all the way back to the beginning of the core covenant with the people of Israel, and the Father revealed himself all the way through the narrative of that story of Israel, where God is a parent to them, sometimes even like a husband to them, so that parent figure, God the Father, is revealed first. But then we get this glorious news of the Father sending the Son, in the New Testament. Jesus Himself said, "God so loved the world that He sent His only Son," God is a sending God. And what he sends is Himself but just another person of Himself: God sends the Son. What does the Son do, when the Son is here? The Son is forever referencing back to the Father over and over again: we'll talk about that in a little while. And then we get to the end of the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and He promises to send the Spirit. Again the Son is the one who sends, and he sends the Holy Spirit who is promised. Jesus ascends and at Pentecost the Spirit is poured out like a crashing wave, but now spills out way beyond anything anyone could have imagined, way beyond just the small circle of disciples, way beyond the Jewish nation, now spilling out into the whole world. And what does the Spirit do? The Spirit continuously references back to the Son, revealing Jesus, pointing people to Jesus over and over again. So the Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit: they're all referencing and referring and loving and relating to each other. This is the nature of how God has revealed Himself.

And to some extent, this should be no actual surprise in the end, because we are surrounded by clues of this aspect of God: Nature is our clue. John Calvin many centuries ago said this: he said, "There is not an atom of this universe in which you cannot see some brilliant sparks, at least, of His glory." <sup>1</sup> "It is glorious for humans to consider that everything we feel hear, smell, taste, and touch transmits the beauty of God, through the beauty of creation. He is the beauty behind all beauty." <sup>2</sup> And more recently I was reading a scientist, a doctor called Ross Hastings, who was talking about the inter-relationality of the created order, even at an atomic level. He said this: he says, "I argue for relationality in God, and a relational nature to creation." <sup>3</sup> He mentions something about quantum physics, of all things! He says, "the entanglement phenomenon..." - this is pretty complicated - "the entanglement phenomenon where if two quanta bump into each other..." - this is a tiny microscopic level - "... they apparently don't forget that they bumped into each other." They behave in a different way after colliding because they have a relationship to each other now. Think about electrons. Electrons have a kind of affinity which describes their desire to bond and connect. So you have this idea of plurality, many wanting to work together as one unit, many in the one. So even at a natural level, even at an atomic level, there's something about having oneness but plurality that relates together. There's something beautiful about it in fact, not just scientific, but beautiful. One of the things I wanted to mention to you this morning is that when we talk about the drawing near to God in the three persons of God, it's not just an intellectual exercise, there's something to do with wonder and awe and beauty in all of this. This is a quote from Steve DeWitt, who was writing about this: he says,

This divine relational diversity existing in harmonious unity is the core and genesis of all beauty. God delights in this. It is infinitely good and holy. He considers it inherently beautiful (to be three).

God's delight in his three-ness in one-ness is reflected in our own delight in plurality in unity. What am I saying? We see it everywhere, think of music.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by John DeWitt: <https://www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/god/the-beauty-of-god>

<sup>2</sup> John DeWitt, <https://www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/god/the-beauty-of-god> – after quoting Calvin.

<sup>3</sup> Interview: <https://www.regent-college.edu/about-us/news/2017/dr-ross-hastings-discusses-his-new-book>

See also *The Entangled God: Divine Relationality and Quantum Physics* - Kirk Wegter-McNelly ISBN 9780415775588

Music has melody, but it also has harmony, and when they come together, it makes what we call music. When we think of architecture, we think of design, and we think of form and structure, and they come together to make buildings. When you think of teams, Lindsey made reference to teams before: we can have individual players on a team, but we think of one team. Even the mystery of marriage and sexual union is that reference that Jesus made a point of when he was talking about what marriage is all about. "And the two become one flesh." So we see everywhere. We see this idea of 'many' actually being thought of as 'one', and family is probably the most obvious metaphor, different members of a family. Maybe some of you who are watching as families now, but it's one family, one unit. So it's all there, in our experience.

But what about you? When you became a Christian, or perhaps in recent years how you relate to God now, where do you tend to begin, when you're relating to God? Who do you focus on, who do you find yourself most easily talking to, in your prayers or in your thinking? Is it the Father? Is it the Son? Is it the Holy Spirit? Some of that will be dependent on the picture you have in your head as to what they're like. It might be that you've had formative experiences of Jesus and so you run to Jesus first. It may be that you're really sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit, so He's the one that you're open to. I can remember many, many years ago, and Lindsey and I were still just dating, and I realised that as we were getting more serious we were going to have to start introducing each other to the in-laws. We weren't married yet, but I remember the first time I met Lindsey's parents and thinking "Oh good grief! You know, I'm kind of keen on Lindsey but I don't know about these other two! Yeah, I haven't met them yet!" And there's something about that, that is a bit of a challenge. It's like, Well, can I have one, but not the others? Well, actually, God wants to draw you into the wonder of *all* of the three persons of God. It's like God opening a door and saying, "You know, don't just think this is a two bedroom bungalow you're moving into, it is huge! This is vast!" And there's so much of God, that it couldn't possibly be restricted down to a limited singular experience.

Sometimes we tiptoe into the presence of God and start to taste it, sometimes we're swept up in what theologians call the 'dance of the Trinity'. The idea that the Father relating to the Son, the Son relating to the Spirit, the Spirit celebrating God the Father, is meant to be described in theological terms as something mutual, moving, dynamic and exciting, and you're not simply observing what God is like, we are sometimes grabbed and drawn into the movement of God, because that is what He is like. Let me read to you, for example, a classic piece from the Old Testament. This is Proverbs 8:27-31 and it's describing wisdom in a personified way but many people think this is a portrait, if you like, of the Holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit is kind of speaking:

- <sup>27</sup> I was there when he set the heavens in place,  
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,  
<sup>28</sup> when he established the clouds above  
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,  
<sup>29</sup> when he gave the sea its boundary  
so that the waters would not overstep his command,  
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.  
<sup>30</sup> Then I was constantly at his side. (This is at God's side)  
I was filled with delight day after day,  
rejoicing always in his presence,  
<sup>31</sup> rejoicing in his whole world  
and delighting in the human race.

We get this little glimpse of the Holy Spirit, dancing alongside God the Father saying, "What shall we make? How shall we make it? Isn't it marvellous! Look at this!" and this delight in the whole world of his delight, particularly in humankind. This is the quality of relationship that we start to see within the Godhead, within the Trinity. Perhaps my favourite gospel of all is John's gospel, and within John's gospel, you get a whole series of really intriguing messages from Jesus, describing his relationship to the Father. This dynamic of the Son and the Father is a real key theme all the way through John's gospel. Listen to the tone of what Jesus says:

[John 3:16 NIVUK:] For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

[That's] John 3:16. Very close to that verse, it says

[John 3:35 HCSB:] The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hands.

"All things into the hands of the Son." Jesus says.

[John 5:19 NASB:] Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.

So there's something reciprocal, something that Jesus emulates when he's listening to and copying what the Father's like and copying what the Father does. Another one from John's Gospel:

[John 10:17 NASB:] For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

Another one:

[John 14:31 NASB:] but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me.

And a final one from John 15. This is when he's speaking to his disciples.

[John 15:10 NASB:] If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

There's something about how Jesus was devoted to, obsessed with, delighting in the Father, just like the Holy Spirit delights in God. At the formation of creation. So within the Godhead, you have this mutual loving relationship over and over again writ large particularly in John's gospel. And you have of course the famous line, in one of John's letters, 1 John 4:8 says this: "God is love." It's very easy to presume that that's simply a description of God's love towards us. But actually, this is God describing himself effectively: God is love, one person to another, the Father to the Son, the Son to the Father, the Son to the Spirit, the Spirit celebrating the Son. This is what we mean by love.

And as we draw closer in to the three-in-one God, we start to see where it is most rarefied. All three persons are self-giving: to each other, utterly devoted to each other, to the point where they lay themselves down for each other. It is at the Cross, it is at the Cross of Jesus Christ that we see the love of God most expressly and clearly demonstrated. Let me read again to you from Steve DeWitt. He says this,

The cross gives finite human beings (like you and me) a small taste of what it is like to be a member of the Trinity. In the moment of His sacrificial death, Jesus gave to us what He had given to the Father for all eternity: *everything*—the total surrender of self. The cross is love's highest human expression and beauty's ultimate source.

The Cross is real beauty. Everything else is a mere reflection. Once again that reference to the love of God and the Trinity of God – beautiful, not just something we can learn, but something we can adore! And at the Cross we see the nature of God: self-giving, self-surrender, completely committed.

So how might you respond to this portrait of God? Does this make you want more of Him? Imagine for a moment that you get an email, and it's from your present broadband provider. These days I mean we're in lockdown. Everybody's pretty concerned that we make sure we're online and steady and stable and getting a good signal. And imagine your provider says at the same cost, we're going to give you one hundred times the broadband that you presently have, 100 times as much broadband! Well, here in the vicarage we've got a pretty good signal in here – we get a lot of megabytes per second download here – but if someone offered me 100 times as much for the same cost, what would I say? Would I say no, no, no, no, I'm fine with the hundredth that I've already got, thank you, you can keep the 99 to yourself, I'm not interested. Don't be crazy! That would be ludicrous! If I could have as much signal, as much broadband as I could possibly ever, ever need. I could run anything, all the time. Think beyond that now. And think about the invitation of God into relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By God revealing this fullness of himself he's saying, "Come on in. There's so much more! There's so much more than you've known this far." I believe on this journey that we're going through, God is inviting is not simply to a knowledge of God, but into the beauty of knowing him, not a cold knowledge, not just simply information, but an invitation to know all three persons well, to know them as individuals, if you like, to know what Jesus is like to know, what the Father is like, but also to know how they relate to each other, and how that draws us in to the whole thing.

One of my favourite lines from the Psalms is still Psalm 18:19. It says, "you led me into a spacious place." You led me into a spacious place: not the kind of constrained small space where I have to kind of cope with what I've got. It says God leads us into a spacious place. How much room is there growing inside of you as you relate to God? How much God is there opening up to you as you draw near to Him? The invitation of the Trinity is into more and more and more of him. And I would put a priority on this, I would say, before we even start to strategise about our mission, before we even start to analyse what my particular gifts are, before we think about socio-political engagement; knowledge of who God is and what He is like is the top, top priority. This is where everything else will flow from. So going deeper with God is not some kind of empty introspection. This is where we get to find out the width and breadth and height of what God is really, really like.

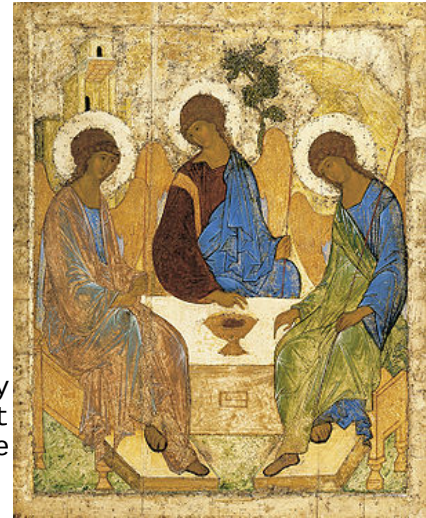
So I want to finish there, and I'm going to hand over to Val now, just to take us through some further thoughts on this day. Over to you Val.

### ***Additional thoughts***

[Val Whiteman:]

Thank you, Andrew. That was absolutely brilliant. And so much to think about, and like you, this is the first time I've heard this, so it's an interesting response to go wider and deeper and further into the love of God.

It's just mind-blowing and when we were discussing this I talked about the icon by Rublev. And you've probably familiar with this: it's not a very brilliantly coloured one: I mean it's so old, it's kind of worn out almost, and it's a picture from Genesis 18 of when the three angels, three aspects of God, visit Abraham under the oak at Mamre. Now there is no perspective in the icon because there isn't. And when you look at it you see these three angels and they're mutually interacting - they're looking at one another. And there's a sort of dance, as Andrew says, between them, which is wonderful. But the thing that really shocked me and rocked me the first time I looked at it was that, as I stared at it, suddenly, the three angels came as it were out - so that they formed a circle of which I was part. When I understood the implications of that, it just blew my mind away, because it meant that God was privileging me to be part of Him - and 'Him' I know is a pronoun probably that is not sort of acceptable but you know what I mean. It's the idea that God in His amazing love and generosity brings all of us into the position where we are a part of Him and we can explore the fullness and the richness of Him. Now, this is absolutely wonderful and we can spend hours and adoration and wonder, but at some point we could turn around and look at our world - as God turns us around and says to us, "Your world is the one that I have made, completely Mine. The people in it are My people. Each of them needs to stand where you stood and be part of the Trinity." How can we do that? What do we have to do? The task is so huge. Well, I think, as Andrew said, we look at Jesus. He said, "If you want to see the Father, you look at me." So, the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily. He's the mortal. So what we do is, what he did and what he asks us to do. We are Jesus in the world. We go and wash the feet of those who have been walking on the dusty roads all day. And we feed the hungry and at this time it's very important to do that, we heal the sick, we raise the dead, because that's what He did, and it's what He says. And that's such a scary thing to be asked to do, particularly when you're in lockdown and you feel you can't do anything, and prayer is so vital as Andrew has said, we start and we finish by adoring the Trinity, by going back into that space where God dwells, but we also remember the amazing thing that he's given us. He's given us a position as a child of God. Each of us are children of God, equally privileged, and again, as Andrew has said, this brings us to this idea of the Black Lives Matter. Of course they do, how evil, how wicked is it of all of us, to think that any human being is not dearly loved by God. How dreadful, how much it must hurt him! So as we think about the future, can we just spend a moment in quiet thinking about what Andrew has said to us, about the amazing love, grace and fellowship that He's poured onto us, and perhaps as we think, bring everybody that we know and love into that fellowship with us as we think about our Lord. So we'll have a quiet for a moment as we do that.



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