

**READING:** 2 Corinthians 13.11-13

A reading from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

Brothers and sisters, put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**GOSPEL READING:** Matthew 28.16-20

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

**Alleluia...**

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. 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, baptising 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 the age.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Alleluia...**

**Sermon for Trinity Sunday, 2026.**

May I speak...

Christianity has a remarkable and rich history of utter heresy. Really outstanding heresy has gone on. And so often, seeing why a doctrine is heretical helps us see the orthodox doctrine clearly. So I'd like to look at a couple of Trinitarian heresies today.

Polytheism is one sort of heresy associated with thinking about the Trinity. It is, simply, the idea that when we talk about the three-fold God, we mean there are three gods. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rather like Zeus, Athena and Apollo, or Wotan, Freya and Thor, or three of your preferred pagan pantheons. Poly, many and theos, gods. To deny polytheism, and to assert the Trinity, is to assert that God is one. This was an important and hard-fought principle in antiquity. The Jewish communities in the Roman Empire were ideologically suspect because they clung tenaciously to the unity and one-ness of their God. They would not get along comfortably amidst the polytheism of the Empire, and they would not sacrifice to the divine spirit of the Emperor. That made you extremely dubious in Roman times because it meant you were standing out against the Emperor's authority. Jews sometimes were allowed not to make this political and religious act of submission, and sometimes they were persecuted for it. When Christians came to be persecuted under the Roman Empire, the same test was often applied. Will you burn incense at the altar to honour the spirit of the Emperor. Christians could not do so. There is a famously odd story of the martyrdom of Polycarp, one of the Church Fathers, who was killed in the stadium at Rome:

And as he was brought forward, the tumult became great when they heard that Polycarp was taken. And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, "Have respect to thy old age," and other similar things, according to their custom, [such as], "Swear by the fortune of Cæsar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists." But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, "Away with the Atheists."

The Roman official tries to make him turn his back on Christianity by insisting that he say "away with the atheists" < in other words, "I have nothing to do with the Christians" > The Roman problem with Christians is that they disbelieve in almost all the gods in the universe. If there are N number of gods in existence, then Christians actively disbelieve in N-1 of them. The Roman proconsul urged Polycarp to abandon this insane and lethal scepticism, to stop being such an atheist. Polycarp's response was to gesture at the real atheists – the crowd who did not believe in the only God who was real.

Polytheism seems less of a risk in the contemporary world, perhaps. We are not called upon to sacrifice at the altars of other gods in order to get on in life. Though we may be required to repeat the accepted pieties of our society. There are all sorts of political or moral declarations which we might be tempted to just go along with. Or we might find ourselves being asked to accept that there are lots of bits of god everywhere about the place, a sort of comforting but unfocused "magical thinking". Isn't everything a bit holy, really? Isn't there lots of truth? This is the kind of risk which polytheism might pose today, and what the doctrine of the Trinity might help us hold fast against.

Modalism is a very different heresy – indeed, we could see it as the opposite of polytheism. Modalism is a more subtle and frankly more appealing intellectual solution to the Triune God. It also started in the early centuries of Christianity, and it suggests that there aren't three gods, nor even three persons of God, but three ways of God's operation in the world. The Father is the name for God when God is creating the world, the Son is the name for God when God is redeeming the world, and the Holy Spirit is the name for God when God is sanctifying the world. Three "modes" of operation or three kinds of action, hence the name "modalism". This might seem a bit too abstract and philosophical to be much of a danger in the modern world. How often do people fall into the trap of thinking of God's mystery in terms of modality rather than personhood?

Actually, quite a lot. You'd be surprised. Looking at a lot of modern writing about the Trinity, modalism appears again and again. . You will sometimes find people giving blessings or naming God as "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer". Now this probably sounds like theological nitpicking, perhaps it is. And God does of course do all those things. But it can apparently be a bit of a slippery slope from explaining that these are things which God does, to saying that the persons of the Trinity are these functions. There have, in fact, been minor scandals on the subject. A diocese in America, and there's no need to go into details as it looks like picking on people, but there is a diocese where they discovered that some priests were baptising people "in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier". As our Gospel reading today shows, this is a substitution for the Biblical injunction to baptise

in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. It substituted a new conception of God for the traditional one, and there was even an investigation into whether these baptisms were valid and might need to be done again.

As I say, this might sound rather pedantic. But I think there must be a reason why it is tempting for us to resort to modalism. There is something satisfying to the modern mind that God is known via a set of distinguishable functions. Many of us work in large organisations where each department has its recognisable function – marketing, HR, executive committee, and so on. Modalism seems to reduce God to the same sort of large corporate body. A bureaucratic notion of God. The mystery of Trinity becomes an organizational chart for the orderly carrying out of activities which involve relevant stakeholders and express our core values. I'm being mildly satirical because modalism does appeal to me. But it may well appeal because it's an orderly, professional theory of God. It abstracts the personhood of God into modes of operation. How many organisation do we see in the modern world where similar abstraction is going on? Where "community" as a notion is placed "at the centre of what we do", but the actual people involved are sidelined. Where there is a great emphasis on "relationship" as a principle, but it is used to leverage power in the actual relationships between organizations and people. It is, after all, much easier to extol "community" than it is to get along with the people in an actual community. Ask any monk. It is easier to hold "relationship" as a core value than it is repair and maintain the actual relationships around us.

But the Trinity is not only surrounded by heresy, there is also worship and celebration and thanks. I'd like to leave us with this poem, by the Scottish Renaissance poet Alexander Montgomery. To the Eternal Trinity:

Supreme Essence, beginning, vnbegun,

Ay Trinall Ane, ane vndevydit Three,

Eternall Word, vha victorie hes wun

Ouir death, ouir hell, triumphing on the trie,

Forknavlege, Wysdome, and All-seing Ee,

lehovah, Alpha and Omega, All,

Lyk vnto nane, nor nane lyk vnto Thee,

Ynmovt vha movis the rounds' about the Ball,

Contener vnconteind; is, was, and sail

Be, sempiternall, mercifull, and just.

Creator vncreatit, nou I call.

Teich me Thy treuth, since vnto Thee I trust,

Incres, confirme, and strenthen from aboue

My faith, my hope, and, by the lave, my loue. Amen.