

“CREDO SERIES 3: “One Lord, Jesus Christ...”

Readings: John 1: 14-18; Philippians 2: 5-8



Sermon Notes

Today we are going to explore the belief that the “One God” (about whom we spoke last time) should reveal Himself to humankind in Jesus Christ. You won’t find the word Trinity in Scripture – even though the disciples were commissioned to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and Paul blessed the Church in Corinth in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now again you might reasonably ask the question: does it matter? Does Trinitarian Christianity matter? Or might I just as well go along to the Unitarian Church in Croydon? Is this idea of the “three in one” just a set of abstruse metaphysical meanderings? Well it certainly mattered enough to the early church for them to attempt to formulate it as one of the distinguishing, cornerstone doctrines of the Christian faith. Those early Christians had taken to heart the idea of praying to Jesus. They understood the saving power of the name of Jesus. Yet they also prayed to the one He called Father. So were they polytheists, believing in a number of Gods? Was the Jesus they prayed to a lesser God, a servant to the High God? On the contrary, they worshipped one God, and they came to see that Jesus was no a demi-god, but “God from God” - thus, never ceasing to be God in substance, never actually being “made” but begotten - emanating from God, never being anything other than the very light and truth of God. God incarnate. God revealed in a human frame.

You have to go back to the 2nd century to early Christian writers who described the way in which God has arranged, designed and planned the bringing about of divine purposes, involving Himself in creation, revelation and redemption, and revealing Himself both in Word and Wisdom.

When those early writers were using the word *trinitas* they were describing the three-fold nature of Godhead. God in three persons, or *personae*. That word simply refers to the masks that actors would wear at different stages of a performance to enable audiences to understand which character was being played. That’s quite a helpful way of understanding these deep truths. Distinct, but related roles played by one divine Actor – retaining one substance, in fundamental unity.

“In the beginning was the Word”, says John, “And the Word was God.” Not made by God, but – as the Creed says – begotten. That word is a translation from the Greek *monogenes* meaning “only one of its kind”, or “unique in kind” – equal in essence, timeless, intrinsic but also distinctive.

And he came amongst us. Born of a virgin, for God the creator needed no human intervention to partake of our humanity. At a point in time, God became incarnate (that is, taking a body) in order to fulfil an amazing plan of salvation. Coming amongst us, not only to minister to us, but to be tried and crucified by humankind. But also to rise from the dead, to ascend into heaven with the promised of a glorious return.

So why? Why did God become human? Why did He choose to come among us? The whole idea of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ has to do with the very nature of God as a relational God. A God who longed to save humanity, to redeem us from our waywardness and disobedience and to be in right relation with us. And to redeem us, he would partake in the very nature He longed to save.

Now you may say, could He not have done that from a distance? Maybe by pressing the “salvation switch” and restoring the relationship that way? Instead, He chose to give us a visible, tangible experience of that redemption. Otherwise we would never have known how that relationship was restored. He sent Jesus so humankind could see him, touch him, hear him, speak to him, be with him, recognise him and – crucially – respond to him.

1. **So he came to *partake* of our humanity.** God remained fully God, fully divine, yet expressed himself in human form. Jesus was the embodiment of God, which is why we use the phrase “incarnate” – in a body. In the Creed, we say: “begotten, not made”. When written, it was a direct response to the heresy promoted by Arius in the 4th century, who declared that “there was a time when Christ was not”.
2. The key phrase is “of one Being with the Father” and the important Greek word is HOMOOUSIS [= same substance]. Pictures here are inadequate, but perhaps one of the best is to imagine coins struck from a single bar of metal, which are identical in composition to the bar from which they were struck. The fact that we go on to say “He came down from heaven” in no way implies that Jesus was somehow less. It is simply a way of describing that amazing act of condescension, as he who was God, rich beyond all splendour yet for our sakes became poor. Thus, Jesus was fully divine *and* fully human.

3. **He came so we could know and experience and relate to him – visibly, tangibly, audibly.** Jesus was the expression of the invisible God. As St Paul walked around the great city of Athens, in Acts 17:23, he came across an altar that they'd erected to "the Unknown God". And unless he had chosen to reveal himself, God would indeed remain unknown. In coming among us, he shared our human experiences - our feelings, our pain, our sadness and our suffering.
4. **God became human to give us an example.** Jesus came from the realm of light and truth. He did not shed those attributes of light and truth when he came among humanity. On the contrary, he showed us what it meant to be "light from light" and "truth from truth". Just as light transfers from one candle to another without any loss of characteristics, so in Christ we see God. We see healing and wholeness. We see the fullness of God's love. We see goodness. We see forgiveness. We see "the way, the truth, and the life..." and the only means of access to God the Father.
5. And finally, **God became human to show us the pattern of life that being human really is about.** That is why the Bible speaks of Jesus as the "Second Adam" - Jesus shows us what it looks like to be redeemed, restored and in right relation with God, created in the image and likeness of God Himself.

And He calls *us* now to imitate that.

Trinity, and the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, represents a uniquely Christian understanding of God. It is what differentiates Christianity from other faiths. It is fundamental to our understanding of the Christian faith.

That is why it is so important to be faithful to the Church's traditional, orthodox understanding of God, and on our journey of faith, to grasp that Scriptural narrative. You don't need to enter theological arguments about intra-Trinitarian relations – leave that to us theologians. But grasp this central truth: that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.

At the Eucharist today, we recall his sacrifice on the cross, his death, burial, and his mighty resurrection from the dead and the promise that he himself made to return again one day in glory. That's when it all becomes real – for here is the point when past and future are made real in the present. The Creed is merely a canvas on which salvation-history has been painted – using the best words that could be found, however inadequate they are.

AN AFRICAN CREED¹

We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the bible, that he would save the world and all the nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptised in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.

SOME POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Read Hebrews 1:1-4, John 8:49-59 together

- **C.S. Lewis once presented what is often called the “trilemma.” He says that Jesus either has to be a lunatic, a liar, or the Lord God; effectively eliminating the option that he is merely a good man and moral teacher. How do *you* think of Jesus?**
- **What can be the modern dangers in the way that we view Jesus in our talking and in our music and in our thinking?**

¹ I especially like this rendition of the Creed, published by Vincent Donovan in his book “Christianity Rediscovered”. It may not be an “official” credal statement, but it was written by native people to help them articulate the “big picture” using images with which they would be familiar - hence, Jesus “always on safari, doing good”.

- **Discuss and consider points 1-5 above. Which is the most important for you and why? Is there another aspect that is even more important? Which one do you struggle with most?**
- **What difference can it make to our life of prayer and worship if we see that Jesus is fully human and fully God?**