

Trinity Sunday 2026

John 3.16-18

It is a matter of some awkwardness that although the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity falls always on the first Sunday after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is conspicuously missing from our gospel reading this morning.

Sed contra: the Holy Spirit is present in our reading after all, albeit implicitly, in its talk of love and gift, which happen to be St Augustine's names for the Third Person of the Trinity.¹ He arrives at his conclusions via what must seem to modern readers to be—shall we say—“creative” biblical exegesis. All the same, there is something theologically compelling about the move, which has shaped the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Western Church ever since.

The pairing of love and gift is obvious enough, as John 3.16 itself makes plain. Giving is what loving does. Perhaps giving is even what loving *is*, what it essentially consists in, certainly when what is given is one's self. The Holy Spirit, so St Augustine tells us, is God's giving of Godself, is God's own outpouring, which the Church received at Pentecost, and receives still,

¹ *De Trinitate*, 15

and indeed must receive if she is to be the Spirit-filled Body of Christ.

But, just as the Father is not first *our* Father, but the Father of the Son; so the Holy Spirit is not first a gift of love to us, but within the triune life of God. The Holy Spirit is God's giving of Godself to God; is the mutual giving of love from Father to Son and Son to Father, whose eternal procession thus gives the pattern for the Father's giving of the Son to the world so beloved by God. The incarnation is the Trinity translated into the flesh and blood of creatureliness and humanity. Indeed, this is what Pentecost and Christmas have in common: both are the eternal life of the Holy Trinity historicised; or perhaps better, both are occasions of history's encounter with and participation in God's eternal life.

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There has, in recent years, been a revival of apophatic modes of Christian theology. And this has, on the whole, been an important call towards intellectual humility before the divine mystery. In Trinitarian theology in particular, it is a response to what is perceived as too easy a relationship between theology and social-and-political policy, as exemplified by the

slogan “The Trinity is our social programme”. The worry here is that Trinitarian theology devolves into nothing more than the projection of our ideological fantasies; in other words, it becomes idolatry. This is a concern to be taken seriously, whether we are talking about God in God’s oneness or God’s threeness: it is very easy to slip into idolatry, to create God in our own image, or worse still, in whatever image that serves our cravings and cupidities.

And yet we must not buy our apophaticism on the cheap, any more than we should manufacture our political theology in the mould of our prior socio-economic preferences. The divine mystery is not an excuse for reticence to dare to speak about God for the sake of the world. It may well be that all our speaking will result in hallowed silence in the end, but this will not be the silence of refusal, but that of the exhaustion of words that finally finds its rest in the One whose Word we have been pursuing all along. This is our lot. Humanity’s vocation, as the speaking part of things, is to give voice on behalf of all things to our encounter with God: we are to tell of the good news of the God who is beyond all telling.

Even so, for many, the Trinity is a special case, before which apophaticism—even agnosticism—seems especially apt. But the absolute mystery of God applies

not only to God's Three-in-One-ness *per se*, but to God *in se*. Each of the Persons are themselves utterly mysterious too, as we remind ourselves whenever we recite the Athanasian Creed: the Father incomprehensible, and the Son and Spirit too. Christology and pneumatology are no easier than Trinitarian theology; or to put things more positively, we have as much access to the Trinity as we do to the Son who has been born and given to us, and the Spirit who has been sent to us.

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None of this is to say that we can directly derive government policy or political philosophy or even personal ethics from the doctrine of the Trinity. The critics are right to point out that monarchists and anarcho-communists alike can find ways of articulating trinitarian theologies to serve their own ideological interests. But the alternative is not to say nothing at all, or to say that the doctrine of the Trinity has nothing to offer to our moral and political lives. What the doctrine of the Trinity gives us, perhaps especially when we have just been thinking about the Holy Spirit, is the Christian understanding of love, which is that it is self-giving. The Holy Spirit, as the

Love-Gift of the Trinitarian life, by whose power the Father gives the Son for the sake of the world, means for us that to love is to give; and more than that, to give of ourselves for the good and sake of those whom we love.

This can hardly be an unfamiliar idea to this congregation here present, nor even to our broader culture. In that great twenty-first century cultural text, Disney's 2014 animated motion picture, *Frozen* [look, I have had two children since I was last in this pulpit on a Sunday morning] one of the protagonists says "Love is putting someone else's needs before yours". That is really not bad as a summary of the foundation of Christian ethics. But it is very much not how the word "love" is used most of the time, which is to denote the desire to possess or to consume. This applies to consumer products, to be sure; but also to persons, as we can discern from the fact that the phrase "I love you, because" seems perfectly completable to us, and we readily fill in the blank with some fact and feature that is pleasing or useful or otherwise beneficial to us.

Now, to say that love is, in Christian terms, about self-giving is not to deny the validity of love as it is more widely and naturally understood. But it is to want to say that such love is incomplete; and it is to

insist that we pursue a better and truer love, that we yearn and strive to participate in the love that belongs properly to God, but which has been given to us to be our own way of loving too.

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For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we may, by the power of the Holy Spirit, receive true love and be received into the divine life of mutual self-giving love. This is, admittedly, neither an ethic nor a politics; but it is surely the only acceptable foundation for how Christians ought to want to live together—so help us God, who is Father, Son, and holy Spirit.