

Sermon on Sunday 31 May 2026 by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Readings: 2 Corinthians 13. 11-13 & Matthew 28. 16-20



Trinity Sunday

In the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (just in case we hadn't made that clear enough already in the hymns and the Collect!) Amen.

Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians, Ch 13 v 13:

"The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all".

Trinity Sunday! But let's start with a quiz. This time it's not my usual rock and pop, it's about the cinema.

[Have a guess – answers at the end]

I will name three films, and invite you to tell me what they have in common:

The Great Dictator – 1940

Dr Strangelove (or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb) – 1964 but recently brilliantly revived on stage with Steve Coogan

Kind Hearts and Coronets - 1949

What has this got to do with the Holy Trinity? The answer is that, when a Greek Christians in the 3rd or 4th century AD tried to make sense of the idea of One God in Three Persons, the image that would naturally come into their minds was one from the theatre – their equivalent of cinema.

The old Greek word we translate as 'person' is 'prosopon', and it means 'mask'. The mask that Greek actors wore on stage. One God in Three Masks?

I need to tread carefully here. When we think of a mask, we usually think of anonymity or disguise. Someone who doesn't want us to know who they are, or more deceitfully, wants to think they are someone else. Many theatrical comedies use the mask this way. But that doesn't sound right for the God I know.

Ancient Greek theatrical masks had precisely the opposite purpose. The mask was used to show the audience which character the actor was representing, as it was common practice for each actor to play several parts in the same play. The mask was also designed to reveal the mood of the character, and might express grief, or anger, or love through conventional designs. These were the original emojis. This was probably necessary in a large outdoor theatre where it is hard to express yourself sensitively when you have to shout to make yourself heard on the back row. The masks were also designed to act as a crude megaphone, amplifying the voice.

So, the role of the mask was not to disguise or conceal, and certainly not to deceive, but to reveal and communicate, to reach out and make known. That does sound rather more like the God I know.

When we read St Paul's words in that much-loved benediction at the end of 2nd Corinthians, or when we hear those words from the Gospel, 'Go and baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', it's tempting for us to imagine that St Paul and St Matthew had learned the Nicene Creed off by heart at Sunday School and were repeating well established Trinitarian phrases. They weren't. The word 'Trinity' doesn't appear in the Bible, and the wise folks who choose our lectionary had to dig pretty deep to find the handful of places where Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all lined up together.

For the early believers, the important thing is that they encountered divine Grace again and again in three recognisable ways, in the divine Father that Jesus taught about, in Jesus himself both in his earthly life and his resurrection life, and in the unpredictable being that first manifested himself in wind and tongues of fire.

Only later did they start trying to make sense of how those three experiences fitted together, and three hundred years later there was still very lively debate about how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit fitted together. Were they all equal, or was there hierarchy in the Trinity? Had all three always existed, or had some come into being after another?

And over the centuries the original image from the theatre became the Latin persona and English person, and was replaced by tricky arithmetical puzzle that we know in our traditional creeds

So much as I love the familiar words of the Creeds, I wonder whether our God is really all that bothered about them. Because God doesn't really want us to believe that He is Three in One and coeternal and consubstantial: he wants us to know Him. To know Him as a loving, creating Father who is happy to be called 'Abba', 'Dad'. To know Him as a redeemer and guide who shared our mortal life and calls us to be His brothers and sisters. He wants us to know him as the Spirit, the fire that enlivens us, the wind that gives us strength and the breath that gives us voice. And once we know him, as our Gospel reading reminds us, he'd like us to introduce Him to our friends.

He is a God who wants to reveal Himself, not hide himself. A God who is out on the stage of human life, who shows us his emotions, his grief, his anger, and above all else His love. A God who wants us to find him anywhere and everywhere in our lives, who wants to meet us in every act and scene of the drama, a God who comes at us from all angles. A God who gets in our faces. Our God does not need us to reduce him to difficult bit of algebra, to a neat mathematical paradox.

He is a God who wants us to encounter him everywhere we can. To discover his face in every crowd, in every fellow creature.

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be present and alive in your lives, centre stage! Amen

Answer: They all had a single actor playing several lead roles.

Bonus point if you got the actors: Charlie Chaplin, Peter Sellers, and Alec Guinness