

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	31 May 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Trinity Sunday
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

Trinity Sunday very finally concludes the Easter season and Pentecost, and leads us on into the rest of the Church's year. Today we celebrate that the one God who exists in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In a statement that I think basically tells us all that we need to know, the modern Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware writes,

'The (Holy) Spirit is God within us; the Son is God with us; and the Father, God above or beyond us'.

The Holy Trinity is of course our dedication here at the cathedral: formally speaking we are the Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity. And when we look towards the east end of the cathedral, we see of course that this dedication is woven into the fabric of the building in a trinitarian work of art whose sixtieth anniversary falls this year. The tapestry that hangs behind the high altar was commissioned by Dean Walter Hussey and designed by the British artist John Piper. It was woven in France by the Pinton Frères, who had worked for Picasso and Graham Sutherland. As you will see if you look at our exhibition in the north transept, it has inspired mixed reactions since it was put up there. There is a famous story of the Canon Chancellor of the time, Cheslyn Jones: when he came to the Evensong at which the tapestry was dedicated he turned up wearing a pair of sunglasses because he found it so garish. A recent correspondent who remembers that service wrote to me, 'he was rather an imposing character... given to rather flamboyant gestures

and so everyone was on the lookout for what might be next - and were seldom disappointed!

Given its trinitarian theme, I would like us to spend a few minutes considering the tapestry.

St Augustine of Hippo famously said, 'if you understand it, it is not God'. If there were a picture that you thought made you fully understand the Holy Trinity, you could be sure that that picture was false. All that any visual representation can do with the Trinity is to gesture towards it; to point us in the right direction. How does Piper's tapestry do this?

Well first of all, it points to the three so-called Persons of the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. 'So-called' because the word 'Person' is a bit confusing. The Persons of the Trinity not persons as you and I are persons, but persons with a capital 'P': perhaps something like centres of being.

These three Persons are represented in the tapestry by the sun, the cross and the flame. These three are bound into unity by means of the green triangle which embraces them all.

So, looking at those in turn, at the top, there is what one person has described to me as a pancake. But I think, more correctly it is the sun, the true source of all light. This points us towards God the Father: God above and beyond us.

C.S. Lewis, who died three years before the tapestry was installed, famously wrote, 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else'. In other words, the Christian faith – the trinitarian faith – provides us with the true light, in which we can see and begin to understand all things. As the tapestry indicates, God is the source of all light, who shows us how to see all things and who, like the sun, sustains all creation by the fire of his love.

At the right of the tapestry, there is what always seems to me a rather odd concept: a flame with feathers. Last Sunday we heard the gospel reading about Pentecost when flames of fire were sent on to the heads of the disciples, empowering them with a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere in the Bible, for example, at the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove. So, although a feathered flame is a somewhat odd conception, this signifies the Holy Spirit who, as we heard in a recent sermon, is the comforter: the one who endows us with strength: *con forte*. God within us.

And then at the centre of the tapestry is the tau cross, which represents God the Son – Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh: the one who is God with us.

Within the tapestry, this cross most immediately catches our eye because of its central position, and because it is at more or less eye level. We come to the Holy Trinity not by thinking about the Trinity as a concept, but through Jesus Christ, and supremely through the cross by which he redeems us and sets us free. It is through the cross that Jesus identifies with our sorrows, takes our sins upon himself, dies and then rises again. It is through the cross that he conquers death and the grave and comes to reign eternally. That is our first contact with the Holy Trinity and our entry point into it.

So, finally, what do I mean by our entry point into the Trinity? There's a very well-known Russian icon of the Trinity which shows Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three angels, seated around a four-sided table. The near side of the table is blank. It's blank because the icon is inviting us into the life of the Trinity. The fourth place at the table on the nearside is for you or for me, to come and sit down with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We ourselves have a place at the table. Perhaps there's something similar in the John Piper tapestry: you feel drawn into it; you want to get in there, walking through the cross in the first instance, and find yourself wandering about in its surreal and vibrantly coloured landscape.

Ultimately, that is the whole point. The Holy Trinity is not a rather strange doctrine that is there to make us puzzle out how something can be three and one at the same time. Ultimately, the Holy Trinity is God's own life of love, within the communion of the three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They live in the perfect communion of love and invite us to come and share in their divine life, both today and for evermore.

