



TALKING OF THE TRINITY



action of churches together in scotland

WORKING GROUP

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FOREWORD

In 2005, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland instructed the newly formed Mission and Discipleship Council to produce a report on 'The Language of the Trinity'.

Recognising that the language we use to refer to God in worship is of importance and concern to all Christians, the Council resolved to approach ACTS requesting that this work might be undertaken ecumenically.

The Faith Studies Network of ACTS readily agreed and this booklet is the result of their work. It presents the issues raised by the use of words other than 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' in reference to the Holy Trinity in an easily accessible way.

I hope the booklet will be widely used and I warmly commend it to all Christians in Scotland and beyond.

Revd. Dr. Angus Morrison

Convener, Mission and Discipleship Council of the Church of Scotland.

PREAMBLE

The material presented in this booklet quite deliberately takes for granted Christian belief in the Trinitarian mystery of God, One and Three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The question we have been asked to help ordinary church members explore is not this belief itself, but rather what might be going on when people either create or encounter new ways of expressing the Trinity beyond the traditional terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In response, we have decided to offer **four short dialogues**, from Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Scottish Episcopalian and Eastern Orthodox contexts, designed to help readers explore the issues which arise when new language for referring to the Trinity is introduced in public prayer and worship in any Christian community. We hope that they will prove suitable for use in a

wide variety of settings, denominational and ecumenical: study groups, lent groups, parish councils, kirk sessions, vestries, worship groups, local clergy meetings, and so on. They can simply be read, or dramatized. But wherever, or however, they may be used, they will have succeeded if people are encouraged to reflect anew upon the mystery, confession, worship and service of the Trinitarian God.





'Let anyone who can formulate it (The Holy Trinity) better (than Father, Son and Holy Spirit) do so by all means.'

William Temple (Studies in the Spirit and Truth of Christianity - McMillan 1914)

PREFACE

Minding our Language before God

When Moses encountered the deity from the burning bush (Ex 3:1- 8) he wished to know God's name. The response given to Moses remains an inexhaustible mystery: "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE". All believers seek to speak faithfully about God, yet acknowledge the limits of their words and naming.

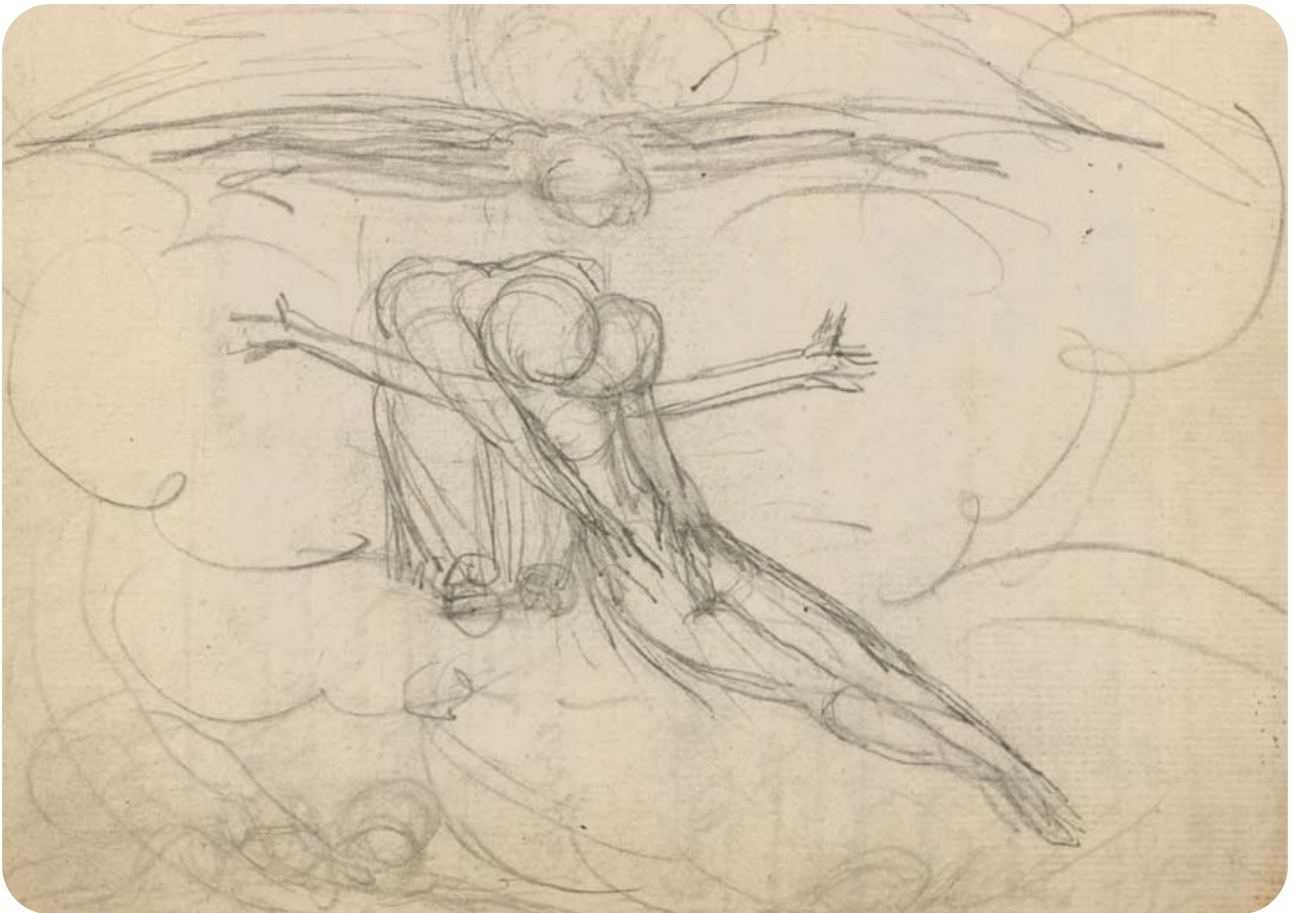
Those who encountered and followed Jesus Christ were aware that he spoke about a special relationship he had with God, as "Son". He called God his "Abba" or "Loving Father". This and its derivative "Father" occur at least 175 times in the Gospels alone. In other places again the New Testament refers to the Spirit who comes from God (and who may also be called the "Paraclete"). Very quickly these three terms were grouped together to be used in Liturgy and in particular the Baptism of new Christians: Father, Son and (Holy) Spirit.

These "names" are placed on the lips of the Risen Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel (possibly completed between 80- 90 AD). This surely indicates the current practice in the community in which Matthew was writing.

Again in Acts 2, Peter offers us a kind of narrative creed in which the three are related, using the language of prophecy and promise. How these three names/ references/ descriptions of God relate one to another and what each means in itself took the church time to develop.

By the end of the first century these three names were recognised as necessary for someone to be baptised as a Christian. It remained essential to speak properly of God. The relationship between "Father", "Son" and "Spirit" continued to be teased out over centuries of discussion and debate. A big difficulty in the first few centuries, was the use of words which were not in the Bible to describe their relationship. To avoid confusion Greek philosophical terms were used (e.g. "nature" and "person"). Gradually Christians began to understand that there is "one God" (that is "one divine essence/nature") but "three persons".

While this was happening, different descriptions of each "person" were ascribed to each one in turn until we have our recognisable Creeds. So under the section on the "Spirit" we find reference to the "Church", while the "Son" was the one who "suffered, died and was buried" and the "Father" who is "almighty".



Such emphases should not however lead believers to think that the "Father" has nothing to do with the Church or that the "Spirit" was not involved in the Creation.

Each dogmatic statement had to be tempered by another if the former were leading to misunderstanding. Similarly today many think some of the words of our Creeds and Liturgy lead to misunderstandings about God. Some insist that if certain usage is not changed then there is a danger of betraying the very revelation brought by Jesus. There is always the need to mind our language, not least before God.



"There is no matter concerning which error is more dangerous, investigation more arduous and discovery more fruitful."

St Augustine De Trinitate, I, 3, 5

TRINITY DIALOGUE 1:

"The Youth Group Prayer."

Scene: The Young Adults Group, "Way Ahead" in St Mark's Church has recently taken a service, which has disturbed some members of the congregation, who have expressed their distress to the minister. An informal meeting has been called, at which the minister and session clerk meet the leader of the youth group and the girl who drafted the prayer which caused most concern.

Cast: **Margaret**, the minister
John, the session clerk
Greg, the youth group leader
Sarah, whose prayer is printed below.

"God, we don't know how to say how cool you are, but we're here because we think you're really cool. Somehow you made this incredible world start - like an inventor making a new thing, or two lovers making a child. You're painting the whole of time with your love. You've been around forever, and you blow our minds.

We want to thank you for Jesus, who shows us the way to be really human. We're glad he broke a lot of rules, touched the hearts of people who don't usually connect with you

at all, and still encourages us to find new ways to take risks for the sake of love.

We haven't been good at moving on from the past, though. We get stuck with pictures of you as the old Nobodaddy with the beard, spying on us from the sky, wanting to control us.

Give us new words and new pictures, so that people can recognise the real you, hanging in there, even when we get you wrong and do crazy things to your beautiful world.

We believe you're around in the world all the time, holding on to us, whether we're aware of it or not. Please let us be able to find what you're on about in the places outside the church where you surprise us, the pubs and clubs, the gyms and massage parlours. Help us to get rid of the baggage that makes people switch off Christianity, the old dogmas and formulas that keep you in prison.

Give us the courage and insight to find words and deeds for today, which let you come alive again to all the people who've given up on church and faith. Creative God, belonging God, inspiring God, we want to say thank you with our lives, amen."

Margaret: Well, thanks to everybody for coming along. First, John and I both want to say how much we appreciate all the effort and imagination that went into your service last week. A lot of people have said how much they got out of it. But John here represents a number of folk who felt a bit anxious that bits of it were over the top. So I thought it might be worth being upfront about the issues together, so that it doesn't somehow go festering round the congregation, with people saying things behind other people's backs. I hope, Sarah and Greg, you don't feel it's any kind of Inquisition. In fact, I think the comments that have been made, both positive and negative, might give us a real chance to do some serious congregational thinking about what's acceptable in the language of worship and what isn't. And why!

Greg: And who decides that? Surely some things work for some people and turn them on, and other things work for other people. Can't we just have a bit of give and take? The ten of us who were involved in the service really sweated our guts out; and we gave Sarah the hard job of writing prayers because she's at least had a year at theological college, and it takes a bit more confidence to do that than to do readings or take part in the scripted drama that replaced the sermon.

Margaret: I quite agree about that, and I think it was a very thoughtful and, in a way, powerful prayer. But it did have some

people's hackles rising. So maybe we could let John explain why that was, and then Sarah could explain what she hoped the prayer would convey. OK?

[Nods all round]

Margaret: Please then, John.

John: Well, there are various things. Some people didn't think the slang was appropriate; "Cool", "Blow our minds", "Hanging in there" and things like that. God's dignity deserves better than slang. And then several folk, including myself, I must admit, found some of it a bit insulting. That Nobodaddy paragraph! I don't think anybody believes God's an old man with a beard. And I think it's outrageous to say he's in massage parlours. But the main thing is your arrogance, suggesting that those of us who've lived happily with the hallowed words of Scripture, and the historic traditions of language and belief are, somehow, out of date, "baggage", as you call it! I don't think it's baggage. I believe it's God's own way of naming himself, and we need to respect and honour that.

Sarah: But how can you go on saying "Him"? It's official, ancient church teaching that God has no gender, but all the imagery of our worship is in male language. That gives people distorted images. All this "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" talk just bamboozles people. And when it's even denied that the Hebrew word for 'spirit' is a

feminine noun, lots of us feel that we're being shut out somehow from our share in worship.

Greg: I'm no theologian, so I can't get all this stuff about Hebrew grammar and church history. Most of us in the Young Adults just believe that we're meant to be showing that in God's eyes it doesn't matter two pence if you're black, white; old, young; native or foreign; thin, fat; even Christian or not. We think it's about whether you work for what God wants - justice among people, nations, genders, ages, sexualities, class differences, mental health and handicap and all the things that break people up in the world. I don't see how any of Sarah's prayer was against that. The Service Planning Group all read it before, and we thought it was brilliant.

Margaret: Yes, Greg. Lots of people felt they could share it as a prayer, even if the language was a bit startling and unconventional. And some even felt we could make allowances, because it was prepared by Sarah, and we all know the impact Christian Feminism has had on her thinking in the last couple of years.

Sarah: How patronising are you going to get? This isn't about making a few concessions to someone on a silly wee late-adolescent ego-trip. I'm clear that for most of its history, Christian theology's been defined and defended and promoted by men, from societies where women weren't thought capable of

thought, let alone welcome to say what they were thinking, or get a hearing. The trace-elements in the New Testament, of women as disciples, trusted witnesses and loyal focal-points for Christian assemblies got suppressed pretty damn fast, as the church was sucked into the macho world of Constantine's Empire and its later Roman derivatives.

It's been one of the triumphs of recent biblical scholarship and early church history to rediscover the new space Jesus gave all those who were, in his day, the 'poor':- physically and mentally handicapped, women, foreigners, even the enemy, so that the normal expectations of contact and community were challenged. Well, if that was Jesus' job in his day, shouldn't we be doing the same kind of thing now?

John: But Sarah, if that's so, aren't you just making up a kind of private agenda where you make up and support the bits you like and discard the rest? I've been session clerk here for twenty years, and an elder for more, and I'm sure that what church means to most people is a safe space where they feel affirmed and in good company with other folk. The language is familiar. It comes from centuries, from the Bible and the early years of the church, and centuries of use. You can't just jettison it as 'baggage' for people that it's precious to.

Margaret: But that isn't the only issue. People learn languages in different times and places. Mostly

when you grow up in a family, you learn their language. And mostly, that's part of a wider community language, a people with history, roots, memories, shared experience. Isn't one of the troubles today that we don't have that any more. We live as individuals. We've made the idea of 'person' in modern society the same as that of 'individual' in the modern European sense. But that's nothing like what the church meant when it talked about God in, or as, three persons. A "person", when the idea of the Trinity as three persons came to evolve in the experience and reflection of the early church, wasn't about some kind of celestial algebra. It was about saying: God isn't God solitary. God means community/ communion. And as soon as God is,- which is forever - God originates company. And long before a world is there, in our sense of a created world, God brings into the company he desires a Son and a Spirit, to be with his Fathering love forever.

Sarah: Well I know all that. Or at least I half know it from college. Not that it means a lot to me, if I'm honest in my experience. I mean I don't bump into God the father, and I have so many friends who find the 'father' word impossible, that I actually try to avoid it, and use something like 'creator' instead. And with Jesus, it's a matter of trying to make sense of the gospels, and sort out what he actually said and did from all the later stuff that the early church loaded on to him. And the

Holy Spirit? Well, I suppose that's a way of saying that God's still around and active. But it's not a sort of separate thing or person.

John: But how can you have the arrogance to say that, when Jesus tells his disciples at the end of Matthew to go and baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit? And John's Prologue, which we read every Christmas, calls him the eternal Word. It's been the faith of the church for two thousand years. You said it at your confirmation when you joined the church.

Sarah: Yes, I did. But I've learned a lot now that I didn't know then. Like how the church's doctrine developed and changed as it moved from the original Jewish setting to a Gentile one. No Jew could think a man was God, and many, many scholars think there's no evidence that Jesus himself thought he was the son of God in any way different from any other loving, devout Jew.

Margaret: But, Sarah, the fact that an idea or understanding developed later than Jesus' own ministry doesn't, surely, mean it's got to be false. I mean the whole sense of the disciples after Easter, their sense of this new presence, first of Jesus himself, and then after Pentecost, their new sense of empowerment, forced them to find a new way of talking which went beyond the normal Jewish categories. And if you believe that the Holy Spirit guides and protects the church, as Jesus promised, then the creeds that

were worked out much later than the New Testament are just as likely to be inspired.

Greg: But why not creeds that have been written since then? I mean, in Iona's Service Book there are modern creeds, and lots of stuff written by people who find the traditional language leaves them cold. It's not that they don't believe it, exactly.....it's more that it means a lot more if they're working at finding their own language, reflecting their own experience, you know. Why isn't the Holy Spirit involved in that?

Margaret: Well, He may well be.....

Sarah: He again! Why 'He'? for goodness sake?

Margaret: Well, I suppose because in John's Gospel, when Jesus says he'll send the Paraclete, the Comforter, that's a masculine word in Greek.

Sarah: But you can't think that everything stopped happening way back then! I mean aren't the disciples told that there's lots Jesus wants to teach them but they're not ready for it yet? So maybe we're ready for it now!

Greg: Yeah, I mean, so much has changed about the world since then. Women have equal rights. We don't tolerate slavery any more. We know much more about the scale of the universe, the billions of galaxies, the time scale of evolution. You can't seriously think that God's saying:

"You have to stick with what they thought back in Palestine or Rome or wherever," as if belief wasn't evolving as well.

John: But God doesn't change, young man! And his word endures for ever. So you can't go mucking around with what's there in Scripture. That's what everything has to be checked against. That's the bottom line!

Margaret: Well, maybe that's a wee bit harsh, John. I think it's great that different groups, young people, women, people from different cultures and so on try to make sense of things in their own terms. It's just that the official teaching of the church can't be settled by small groups of people doing their own thing.

Sarah: But nobody was saying anything about the official teaching of the church! I was saying a prayer; trying to find words that our group can say with integrity and some kind of animation and freshness. The traditional language just washes over people at best, and at worst it really alienates some of us, with its patriarchal overtones. I mean, it's not as if the church believes God has a gender, so the use of imagery which departs from that ought to be applauded, not carped about. Don't you think it's quite important to try out new expressions of faith in different times and places and idioms?

John: Well, it may be fine with your smart friends who've done theology, but it's not appropriate

in my view for a church setting, where it either baffles or distresses folk. People feel at home with the traditional language.

Greg: Well, not us! Isn't it more important that we do something that feels authentic to us, something that rings bells for us, than kowtowing to the establishment formula?

Margaret: I'm certainly glad you went through that process of thinking through how you wanted to write the prayer. And I'm even glad you used it in the service, though I could hear the odd gasp as you read it, and it's clear that it made some people quite uncomfortable. But I don't want us to get polarised about it. Everybody in this conversation has had important things to say, and I think we could take some of these issues a bit further. So I'm wondering whether I could work out a series of discussion themes for our next batch of "Exploring the Faith" evenings. Of course they're mainly for enquirers thinking of joining the church, but we always say that existing congregational members are welcome too. How about trying to deal with some of these themes, like "The language of the Bible and the language of today", or "Tradition and authority"?

John: Sounds a shade academic, Margaret. Not exactly a turn-on.

Greg: Well, you wouldn't actually need to call it that, but you can see that the issue's got us all

pretty turned on for the last wee while, so I think it's worth giving it a go.

Sarah: So do I, and we could maybe look at some other examples of modern liturgies or hymns and things.

Margaret: OK, I'll try to work something out, and come back and check it out with you before we go public with it. Thanks again for coming round. I'm sure we can make this part of the learning-curve.

Questions for discussion

- Which character in this dialogue did you find most/least sympathetic? Why?
- Which statements would you pick out as most important for further discussion?
- Mark any sentiment or assertion you really disagreed with strongly. Why?
- Do you think the original prayer was acceptable for use in church? Why/ why not?



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"We honour God with silence, not because there is nothing to say... but because we realise that we always fall short of an adequate understanding."

St Thomas Aquinas In Boethius de Trinitate, Problem. q.2, a.1, ad.6

TRINITY DIALOGUE 2

Episcopalians converse at coffee after the Eucharist on Trinity Sunday.

Sadie: Rector, did you notice how the Curate began his sermon this morning?

Rector: (heart sinking): Oh, yes it did sound a bit different, what was it ...?

Sadie: In the name of God, Source of all Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit - that's what he said. I've never heard that before, you don't say that, do you? Did you give him permission to say that?

Rector: No, but it's really just another way of saying Father, Son and Holy Spirit, isn't it - at least you noticed it! What did you think of the sermon?

Jane: (coming over with her cup of coffee in her hand) Sadie, you're not bothering the poor Rector again are you? What's it this time?

Sadie: Well, it's how the curate began his sermon this morning. Why isn't Father, Son and Holy Spirit good enough for him if the Rector uses it?

Jane: Maybe you should ask the Curate! But isn't it a bit like that hymn we had too - by the way, Rector, good choice of hymns today - keep it up - you, know, the

one where we sang "Mother, Brother, holy Partner; Father, Spirit, only Son: we would praise your name for ever, one in three and three in one." I liked that - very up to date, made more sense to me than usual.

Sadie: I was coming on to that - I really object to that, Rector.

Rector: What don't you like about it?

Sadie: I was always taught to call God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to make the sign of the cross when I do that as a mark of love and reverence. But all this mother, brother, partner stuff - the old beliefs are going out the window and you're letting it happen.

Rector: Sadie, I do understand that and why you might feel as you do. The church has changed a lot in your lifetime and it can't be easy. But don't you think Jane's got a point - I think she was meaning that we can sing the same faith in the Trinity but use other words, at least from time to time - after all, Father, Son and Spirit are still mentioned in the hymn.

Alan: Sorry to butt in, Rector, but have you fixed a date for that Outreach Meeting yet? We need to get on with it you know.

Rector: Let me get my diary - it's in the sacristy. Keep on talking while I go and get it.

Alan: (affectionately): What are you getting so worked up about, Sadie - not enough bowing and scraping today? The Rector annoyed you again?

Sadie: It's more important than that, Alan. He's let the Curate change the names of the Trinity! Did you notice that?

Alan: Afraid not. I'm more bothered about getting more people into the church than arguing about trivial details. That's the trouble with the church - navel-gazing all the time. God's the same, whatever name you give him, isn't he?

Jane: That's exactly what Sadie's arguing about Alan. By the way, God isn't He or Him, didn't you hear Mother in that hymn today? The Rector said at the recent 'Journey of Faith' group that God doesn't have gender and that Father doesn't mean that God is male or a man. Anyhow, we're living in the 21st century and we need to take it on board that many women feel excluded by all this male-dominated language about God. It's off-putting for God always to be he and him.

Sadie: I'm a woman and I don't feel excluded. I suppose you think that means there's something wrong with me. Anyhow, what matters is that Jesus was a man and Jesus is God, isn't He? Doesn't that mean it's right to call God He and not She and Father and not Mother.

Jane: You'll have to ask the Rector that one - he's the

theologian, that's what he's paid for!

Alan: Anyhow, I'm all for trying out new ideas in the service if it helps get people in. A change now and again is good for us - makes us listen to what we hear and sing! Makes it more relevant.

Rector: (clutching diary): Found it. Now, what about this Wednesday, at yours Alan?

Alan: Great. I'll make sure everyone knows.

Rector: Thanks. Now, where have we got to?

Jane: Sadie's still not happy. She's got a question for you.

Sadie: I couldn't be at "Journey of Faith" last week, but Jane says that you said God doesn't have gender, male or female. But Jesus was a man and Jesus is God, isn't He?

Rector: That's the beauty of the Trinity, Sadie. As God Jesus is the Second Person and so, as the Ascension teaches us, takes his humanity (and his manhood) into heaven, into God's life. I suppose we'd say that God experiences being a man, but it's more important surely that he, I mean God, has human experience. It's the same kind of argument about women priests ...

Sadie: Don't like them either! I know you mean well, but I just feel the church is changing the liturgy and the hymns and the prayers to fit in with modern ideas, change for change's sake. And it's not bringing more people in anyhow, is it?

Alan: I agree with you there Sadie, that's why we have this new Outreach Group - I'm very encouraged by that.

Jane: Well, Rector, I hope you keep trying new things in the service, not all the time of course, but I have a friend who comes occasionally and says that she really likes our combination of a traditional service with more modern elements, thinks it's quite authentic. She was here today and she liked that collect before the readings - here it is on the pewsheet, "Eternal and glorious God, you dwell in a high and holy place, yet draw us near in your beloved Son; we humble ourselves before you and pray that we may know your loving presence, Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giver, our one true God for ever". I can understand that better than the old one.

Sadie: I think it's confusing - something different every week. It was better when we only had the Prayer Book. I had to learn all the collects off by heart at Sunday School, they're part of my life, I love them.

Rector: Of course, I love many of them too and even know some of them off by heart like you, Sadie. I even like the Prayer Book - we do still use it on Saturday morning, you know. But we can't stand still. After all, we have the Bible in modern English and we've moved over to the modern liturgy for some of the services, like today's. Why can't we branch out a bit with the hymns and prayers too? It's not as if anyone's denying that

God is the Trinity, just trying to find new ways of expressing that faith. Anyhow, we haven't given up Father, Son and Holy Spirit - I still begin my sermons that way and we had several traditional hymns today. And what about the Nicene Creed - we sing that every week and there's no change there. And baptism's still the same - in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Alan: Maybe we'd have more baptisms if this Outreach Group really gets going! Anyhow, I'm no theologian - you've lost me. All I know is that we should concentrate on our new outreach plans. We need to think for the future, not bother so much about in house matters!

Rector: To be fair to Sadie, Alan, what we believe and how we express it is very important and we don't all agree, but that's normal for Episcopalians. Oh, Christine, did you want a word ... ah, yes, the new dalmatic.

They drift off to see other people.

Questions for discussion

- Arguing about the Trinity is a distraction from outreach and mission - do you agree?
- People still think that God, Father, the Son and Holy Spirit is male - do you agree?
- Is changing the language enough - is Trinity really an outmoded concept inaccessible to modern people?



"God only knows how to be love, only knows how to be Father. And he who loves is not envious, and whoever is Father, is so totally. This name does not allow for compromise, as if to say that God is father only in certain aspects and not in others"

St. Hilary of Poitiers: De Trinitatae. 9:61

TRINITY DIALOGUE 3

"In the name of the Creator, the Incarnate Word and the Sanctifier..."

[...Later in the Roman Catholic Chaplaincy:]

Laura: What was that all about? You would think he would just say what was written, instead of adding his own version.

James: Sometimes Liturgical Language changes "from the ground up"? Take, for example the filioque clause. In the original Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed we have the "Spirit proceeds from the Father" only and there was no "and the Son" as there is now. We all quite happily affirm regarding the Holy Spirit that the Spirit is the one "who proceeds from the Father and the Son." It was only by gradual change did we change this Creed. If we can change something as serious as the Creed we can change part of the phrasing at Mass. The change in the Creed happened without the agreement of everyone at the beginning. Even today many still disagree with it. The Pope did not accept the change at first but it was later accepted by him. The same thing could happen here. Our parish starts using it and then it's picked up and used everywhere.

Wilma: It certainly made me think about what I was saying rather than just saying something by rote. It was a beautiful way of describing the Trinity, don't you think? It seems to express the whole history of Salvation: the dawn of time, the work of Jesus of Nazareth and the present activity of the Holy Spirit today.

Laura: But he could have expressed these aspects of the Trinity in the Homily. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that "Father" is the "proper" name of the first person of the Trinity, not just a metaphor. And Jesus was definitely male and calls himself "the Son." These are revealed terms. We cannot change these words on a whim.

James: But it's not a whim, Jesus compares himself to a "Mother hen" who gathers her chicks under her wings. When we hear the Titles of Jesus I've never noticed that one next to "Son of David." When we see beautiful stained glass windows of the Kingdom, we see "the Sower" but not the woman who kneaded the yeast in with the flour. And where is the stained glass window of the woman who lost a coin and searched the house until she found it. I like the Good Shepherd but we should also have a picture of a woman turning her

house upside down to find the coin, such is the Kingdom of God. In fact that should be above the door of the confessional.

Wilma: Yes and I've got a lovely quote by St Anselm who asks "And You, Jesus, are you not also a mother?" But I don't like things to be changed too often. Otherwise I'm too busy working out the meaning of things and forget to say my prayers. Prayers are not meant to be barriers we have to jump over but vehicles to connect us with Jesus.

Laura: That's it. There is a saying that the "law of prayer is the law of faith." We cannot mess about with these words without changing the meaning of the Trinity we believe in. By all means use these terms in private prayers and readings but not in public worship or at a baptism. God is neither male nor female as humans understand these terms. Clearly Motherhood and Fatherhood both come from God but we have these terms revealed in Scripture, hallowed by usage and confirmed by the Great Councils.

James: The trouble is, people, especially women feel left out, as if they too are not "made in God's image and likeness." It's a scandal that language is changing to be inclusive but the Church stands still. The "Sex Discrimination Act" has come from God's providence. Such a consideration is important to people, it should be important to the Church. Jesus asked us to read the "signs of the times" that's what we are doing and

responding. That same Thomas Aquinas that you quote, Laura, also tells us that people understand according to where they are coming from, not just according to the intention of the one speaking or writing.

Laura: Sorry, I don't understand that. Surely if something is true, then it's true whether it's welcomed or not.

James: Well then let's call it the "Law of Frankenstein". If Frankenstein's Monster came in here wanting to be friends with us, we wouldn't hang around waiting to find out, we would be out the emergency exit. So we may mean to say: "God is God and he is equally the origin of maleness and femaleness" but people hear "God is a he" and women aren't really made in his image and likeness. Let's get away from sexist language so that everyone can feel included. God is Creator, Incarnate Word and Sanctifier. What's the problem?

[Enter Father, overhearing the words...]

Priest: I thought my words might make an impression. Isn't it great that the Church is alive and active in the world? We really are being "Salt to the earth" when we put equality so prominently in our Liturgies.

Laura: But, Father, if we go to water the ground of the earth with holes in our bucket then there will be no water when we get there. If we keep changing to suit the latest trends we will have

nothing to offer. The Church is to pass on what she has received in Revelation.

Priest: Is the Holy Spirit not still guiding the Church? Perhaps the Holy Spirit or the Sanctifier is "making holy" an area of life, of ecclesiastical life, which is in need of his touch. Perhaps in using non-sexist language God is allowing us to reach part of his Creation untouched before now and hallow it. The Holy Spirit as always "comforts the afflicted" and "afflicts the comfortable." The Holy Spirit comforts the neglected women of the world and afflicts the smug men who have it all and have nothing to lose.

Laura: We can and should be working for the true liberation of women but the language of the Trinity should not be changed so easily or to fit in with our perceived needs. The Trinity has its own internal life, the words you, used, Father, don't express anything about their relationship to each other. The Father is the father of the Son. What is the relationship between the "Creator" and the "Incarnate Word." That isn't expressed at all, nor is either's relationship with the sanctifier.

Priest: The name of the Holy Spirit does not of itself express a relative relationship with either the Father or the Son. You have to explain that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father nowadays at the very least. No version will be perfect, each one has its advantages and its disadvantages.

Wilma: Yes, I am inclined to agree. Perhaps it's just a question of emphasis. Laura wants to emphasise one thing while Father and James want to emphasise another truth.

Laura: Yes, it is a matter of emphasis but the priority has to be on the other side. This debate comes down to an argument about Christ. Christ is divine...

Priest: (interrupting): but He is truly human with a human nature, a human will, he made use of human words. The Councils teach us to give due regard for both the human and the divine natures without confusion.

Laura: Two natures yes, but the person is a divine person. The divinity has to have priority. Just as the humanity is led by the divinity so the world has to be led and guided by Revelation. So also with the Church and its life. The faith of the church leads and informs the human words we use not the other way about. Jesus tells us to be "Salt to the earth." By so being, we can change words from the inside, as it were. Therefore the Church can be compared to the Incarnate Word.

James: Who says so?

Laura: Well the Second Vatican Council makes the comparison. The word the Council uses is "analogy." As the divinity of Christ transforms the humanity so the power of God in the Church transforms its human structures and its frail human beings. In fact

just recently the Holy Office spoke about the believing Church as a "transtemporal subject of the faith."

James: What does that mean?

Laura: When the great Councils used the terminology and concepts of its age, for example, "Fatherhood" and "Sonship" these expressions themselves underwent a transformation from within. Expressions are used which are raised beyond their day-to-day meaning. This is what Jesus is pointing to when he commands us to "call no one on earth 'father'."

Wilma: So for Christians "Father" and "Son" do not mean the same as in normal speech?

Laura: Exactly, in the Creeds these terms no longer have the physical, biological notions they once had. The Christian faith was not conformed to the culture but the culture was conformed to the Christian faith.

Priest: Normally I like to have the last word, but I think I'll leave things there.

Questions for discussion

- "Father" has changed its meaning because of Revelation, and "celibacy" has a new direction (i.e. the Kingdom). Can you think of other words which have a new meaning because of the Christian message?

- We often see stained glass windows depicting the Parable of the Sower, but rarely of the parable of the Woman kneading bread (Mtt 13). Try drawing a picture of the Woman kneading bread and write "Kingdom of God" under it. Compare it with the versions of others in your Group.
- "Water, salt and nature" are used as "Sacramentals" pointing us to God, how far do we regard "words" themselves as "sacramentals"?



It is impossible to behold the 'image of the invisible God'¹ except by the enlightenment of the Spirit, and impracticable for one who fixed his gaze on the image to separate the light from the image, because the cause of vision is of necessity seen at the same time as the visible object. Thus fitly and consistently we behold the 'brightness of the glory'² of God by means of the illumination of the Spirit, and by means of the 'express image'² we are led up to him of whom he is the express image and seal. St Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*.

¹ [the Son] 'who is the image of the invisible God' *Colossians* 1.15

² [God has spoken to us by His Son] 'who [is] the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person' *Hebrews* 1.3

TRINITY DIALOGUE 4

An East/West interchange: the Orthodox view

From: Fiona **To:** Basil

Dear Basil, May I continue by email our phone conversation about how we can open up a grass-roots conversation with Orthodox Christians about the language used in worship? And particularly the issue of whether 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' can legitimately be replaced on occasion by other forms of words? You say there is little disagreement about this among the Orthodox, but would you be willing to tell us what is different about the Orthodox sense of the issue? Could you possibly illustrate it with, say, some quotations from the Canon of St Andrew of Crete which you mentioned?

Sincerely, Fiona.

From: Basil **To:** Fiona

Dear Fiona, What would we do if we felt we needed new language about the Trinity? I think, in a word, we would say: don't start

by going forward; go back. When we have explored the riches of the liturgy we already have, we will know better how to talk about the Trinity to people today.

So much of our liturgy speaks to the Three in One, but just taking the Canon we spoke about, which I've got here because it's the first week of Lent and we're learning to do it every evening, here's an example of the myriad ways it speaks about, or rather to, the Trinity without just saying "Father, Son and Holy Spirit":

"O simple and undivided Trinity, O holy and consubstantial unity: you are praised as Light and Lights, one Holy and Three Holies. Sing, O my soul, and glorify Life and Lives, the God of all."

This is so simple, yet it expresses the way the One is the fountain of the Many, the unity in diversity, the Trinity the origin of the teeming world, and of human communion in so far as we achieve it. Or this to the Mother of God:

"In you, O undefiled, is the mystery of the Trinity praised and glorified. For the Father was well pleased with you,

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and in you the Word made his tabernacle among us, and the Holy Spirit overshadowed you."

This links the Trinity indissolubly to the Word born of a woman, with huge consequences 1) in how we see women, and 2) in understanding that even we in the flesh are caught up into the Trinity. That's just one example. Does that make sense?

Basil.

From: Fiona **To:** Basil

Dear Basil - well then, how does that affect how we see women?
F.

From: Basil **To:** Fiona

Dear Fiona, A short answer would be another quotation from the same thing:

"As from purple silk, O undefiled Virgin, the spiritual robe of Emmanuel, his flesh, was woven in your womb. Therefore we honour you as Mother of God in very truth."

All women (men too in some respects) are seen as potential sharers in Mary's destiny as Mother of God, especially mothers (who are honoured in Orthodox cultures) and monastics. Because of this women have a vital spiritual role in the house and the church. B.

From: Fiona **To:** Basil

All right Basil, I might ask you more about that, but meanwhile does Christ being born of woman

really mean that we in the flesh are caught up into the worship of the Trinity?

From: Basil **To:** Fiona

Another short answer since I've got it in front of me,

"O Trinity without beginning, I glorify you, undivided in essence, and with my tongue of clay I cry aloud as the Cherubim: Holy, holy, holy is He who is, and remains ever the one eternal God."

And so on - this could go on for ever; but this is the kind of language that we find mind-blowing, and that inspires us to try to find more words. So I look forward to talking more about it when I get back. B.

From: Fiona **To:** Basil

Dear Basil, It was good to have even the truncated email conversation we had when we were last in touch, but perhaps you might, after your holiday, write a little bit more about a couple of things. The first is that the caricature of Orthodoxy in some places is of rigid traditionalism, holding on to the past because it is the past. What you were saying most strongly last time, I think, was that the Orthodox liturgy as it stands continues to nourish and excite and be life-giving for the whole community?

Sincerely, Fiona.

From: Basil **To:** Fiona

Dear Fiona, Yes, it is so rich

already that the idea of innovative language in worship gets little response from us. As you know, the Orthodox aren't going to change the Liturgy. It is par excellence the standard for how we interpret scripture. Over the centuries we have added to it, often more by accident than design, and sometimes we drop things out in practice to meet particular situations, but they remain in the text, and we never seem to have replaced anything. I leave aside the question which immediately strikes a western listener - isn't that totally lacking in creativity? Too long to explain, and unnecessary to you, why we think that this is more creative than innovation.

From: Fiona **To:** Basil

Dear Basil, If 'innovation' and 'creativity' are at odds with each other in Orthodox liturgical experience, I think it would be worth you spelling out why that is.

From: Basil **To:** Fiona

Dear Fiona, The deepest answer is that creativity and innovation are not the same. It is much closer to the truth to say that creativity and originality are the same, though the word 'originality' is often now used in a displaced sense which is equivalent to 'innovation'. But the root sense, in my Chambers Dictionary, is 'relating to the origin or beginning...standing as source in relation to something, ...creative.' So to be original for us is to be

related to the origin or beginning of Christian liturgy, to the source of the whole Christian vision.

Of course that does not mean that we don't use our own words of prayer as well - that's an essential part of our individual prayer, mixed with things we have by heart from the prayers of the saints; and that prayer goes on silently alongside the communal action in the course of the liturgy - one can move in and out at will of the different levels of prayer, individual and communal, that are going on, because there is rarely any uniformity imposed on the congregation in the form of 'Now do this', 'Now do that', not even a uniformity of sitting in one place, because (as you know) we stand, and also move about when we need to. So that is where our individual freedom and our own words come in.

Another answer more particular to our present historical circumstances is that for the new Orthodox communities in this country Orthodoxy is not the past. Our community for example is more than half composed of English-speaking converts, and the rest are rediscovering Orthodoxy after 70 years of Soviet atheism. Our problem is not to think of some new way of saying things we have heard many times, but how to bring back into our lives the largely unheard but incomparable treasury of the Eastern liturgy, which is not just words, but action and music and icons and a kind of slow dance - all the human arts

simplified and pared down to what is purely archetypal. So our priority is naturally more towards recovering the huge liturgical creativity of the last two thousand years than towards making what would be feeble innovations of our own in ignorance of it.

But you mentioned wanting more about a couple of things - what was the other one? B.

From: Fiona **To:** Basil

Dear Basil, The other thing was something we didn't really talk about earlier. I think much Western culture now - but not only Western, Asian for example - has a sense of the provisionality of language. Isn't it a kind of inflexibility to make absolute any single form of words? The whole 'postmodern' perspective - might we say that the Spirit inspires the church to see the potential of alternative words which suit our present time and place, a kind of revitalisation? But then why should that not also have liturgical expression, even if it's recognised that in one sense it's ephemeral? local? F.

From: Basil **To:** Fiona

Dear Fiona, On the provisionality, yes indeed - this idea has been part of eastern Christian thought since at least the 6th century, in what is called the apophatic or 'unsaying' principle, which I know will be familiar to you, that any true statement about God, once said, must then also be unsaid because it is not adequate on its

own to the reality. Language about God is not just provisional, it is always inadequate. It's for this reason (together with the injunction in Matthew 6 to avoid 'much speaking') that the Jesus prayer and other one-phrase prayers have been so deep a part of our prayer tradition - but they usually lead not to new words (though that also happens) but to no words at all, to the prayer of silence; and it is chiefly this prayer of few words or of a deep and warm listening silence in the congregation which gives our liturgy its impact.

The creativity of Orthodox cultures, therefore, and their urge to find fresh expression of the original source, bursts out not in the liturgy - this is where we come to take in and be nourished by the source. Rather creativity flows out from this into the secular arts and everyday life, where one can see huge flowerings for which the liturgy has been seminal: the modern Greek poets for example, or Russian music; Orthodox architecture, Orthodox painters whose styles are rooted in iconography, Greek village dance, the complex symbolism of everyday life in all Orthodox cultures, and so on. Another way of putting this is to say that the Eastern liturgy already contains a staggering variety of expression at a timeless level, and it is from feeding on this timeless level that creative response is made to the time in which we find ourselves. In Orthodox cultures, which have been the front line of Europe and

have experienced more than most the devastation of war, invasion and social collapse, it is the liturgy and the church which have rebuilt the culture again and again. And even here in the UK, where the Orthodox presence is still new and minute, the liturgy has begun to shape secular music (John Tavener), icons have influenced painting, and so on.

Do these answers make any sense of the questions you put to me? I hope they can at least clarify our own discussion, even if it fits awkwardly with what western traditions are now trying to do from their perspective. Each tradition has its own priorities in what needs to be done next, and I can only speak for ours as I see it. Kindest regards to you, B.

Questions for discussion

- 1 When looking for words to express spiritual truths, are there examples where it is more creative and original to go back not forward?
- 2 Is the Trinity a matter for academics, or a matter of experience?
- 3 What examples can you think of where liturgy has influenced the surrounding culture?





Glory to God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. Amen.

Scottish Episcopal Church: Alternative form of GLORIA PATRI from Daily Office

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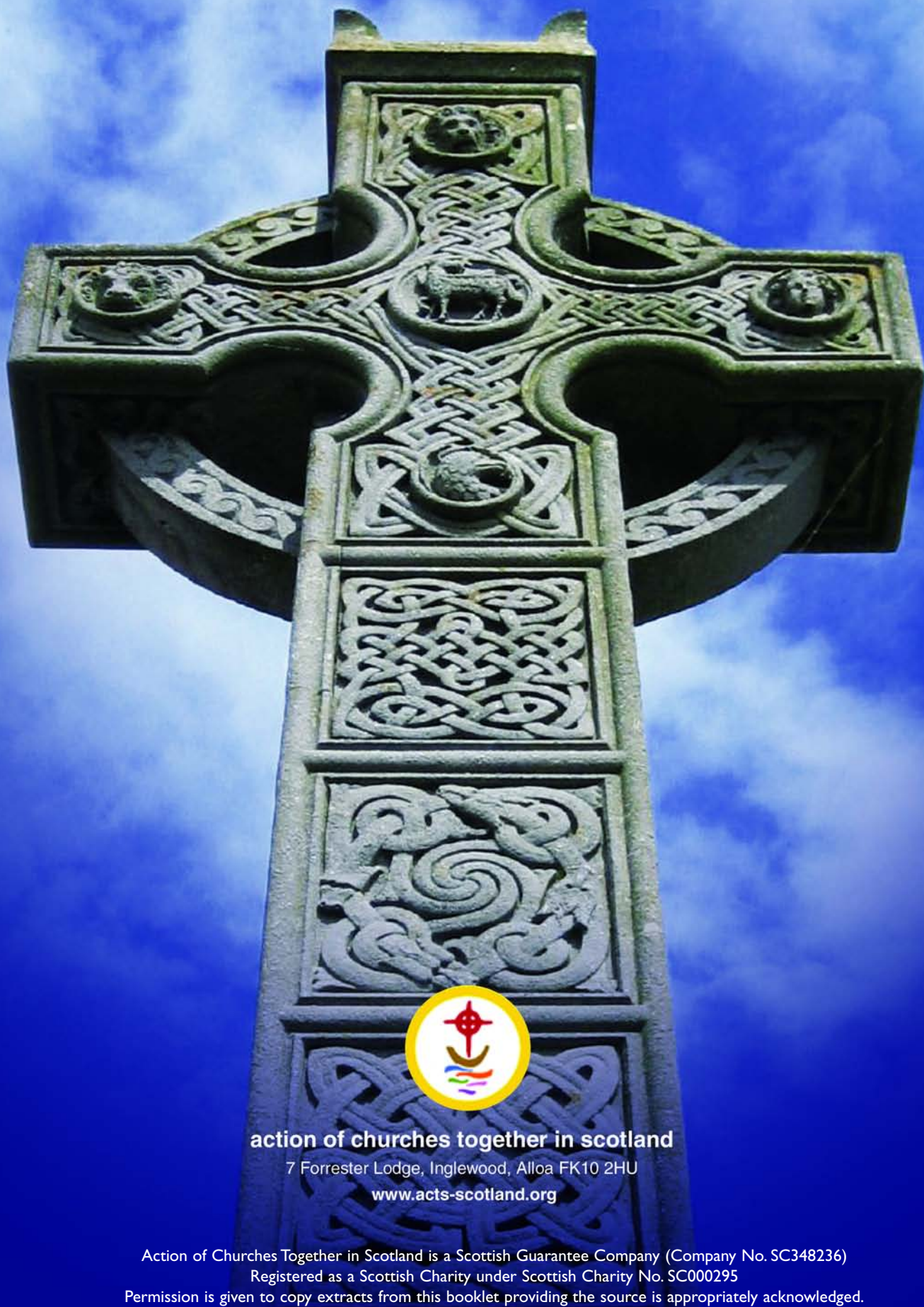
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