Over the last week, hearing that I was due to preach this morning, more than one person expressed a degree of sympathy for me. Trinity Sunday, eh? That’s a tough one, isn’t it? For a start, if all this talk about the Trinity is so important, why doesn’t the Bible mention it anywhere?

It’s a good question, isn’t it? We have enough trouble believing what is in the Bible without getting bogged down in things that aren’t! My friend was quite right to say that the Bible doesn’t talk about the Trinity as such.

But the whole reason for having doctrines about the Trinity in the first place is to help us to understand more deeply some of the things that are explicitly in the Bible. Like a lens which brings things into focus, talking about God as Trinity helps us to understand more clearly what the Bible tells us about who he is and what he does.

This is the job of what we call the ‘doctrines’ of the Christian Faith, not least the doctrine of the Trinity. Not to confuse us but to help us to come to grips with what God has revealed to us about himself and so develop a life-changing awareness of how wonderful he is.

We can illustrate it like this. I quite enjoy driving my car around the place. I turn a key, press down a few pedals, and sail off wherever I want. As long as the roads are open, of course! But just suppose that I understood more about what was going on under the bonnet. That way, my appreciation of my car and what it can do and how it does it, would increase dramatically. And, more importantly, if some sort of crisis were to come up, either with my car or someone else’s, I’d be more likely to know what to do about it.

It’s the same with Christian doctrines about God. It’s perfectly possible to be a fine Christian and never get to grips with the doctrine of the Trinity. At the gates of heaven, what will matter is whether or not we know God, not how much we think we know about him! But the thing is that knowing about God and knowing about God are not unrelated. In any relationship, knowing about the other person is a great help when it comes to knowing them better.

The more we know about God, the greater will be our sense of awe at the majesty of who he is. The more we know about God, the deeper will be our worship. The more we know about God, the stronger will be our desire to love and serve him to the best of our abilities. The more we know about God, the better equipped we shall be to help ourselves and others when we get into difficulties with faith.

This is why Christian doctrine and theology is so important, not just for egg-heads, but, as far as we are able, for all of us: to help us make sense of, and do justice to, what the Bible as a whole tells us about God.

Doctrines like the doctrine of the Trinity took shape as the early Christians got to grips with this, particularly as they grappled with the issues they encountered concerning what they believed about Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

For example, take the firm belief, based squarely on Christianity’s Jewish roots, that, ultimately, there is only one God. Fine. But then add to this the equally firm conviction that Jesus is the divine Son of God. Now if, while Jesus was on earth, he prayed to a God in heaven whom he called his Father, doesn’t that at least suggest that God is not only to be seen as one, but also as at least two?

Well, yes, it does. And so something has to give. The history of first few centuries of the church is the history of the various ways in which this and other conflicts were resolved. Some of the solutions were nothing if not ingenious.

A chap called Sabellius, for example, started out with the belief that God is one and went on to account for his apparent three-ness by stating that he passes through phases or modes of being first the Father, then the Son and
then the Holy Spirit. Just like an ice cube can start off by being frozen solid, then melt to become liquid and finally heated up until it boils away as steam. The same water but three different ways of being water.

Someone else with some bright ideas was Arius. He was also convinced that God is one. His solution was effectively to deny that Jesus was really God at all. He said that Jesus could not have been divine in the same way that God the Father is divine and that, rather than always having existed, ‘there was a time when the Son was not’.

But others in the church realised that statements like these took the heart out of Christianity. That if Jesus was not the divine, eternally-begotten Son of God, then the whole thing unravels. If Jesus were merely a human being then his death on the cross, far from being a wonderful act of self-sacrifice, in which God himself was bearing the sins of the world, becomes a ghastly travesty in which God in heaven was punishing Jesus as an innocent third party.

And so this is where the Creeds come in. They are designed to keep our thinking on the right track. They say what to us sometimes come across as rather peculiar and unnecessary. But that’s because, at the moment, we’re walking down the centre of the road. We don’t need to focus so much on the fences at the edge. But it’s important that they’re there in case we begin to wander off-centre.

Each of the statements in the Creeds serves to refute the error of a particular heresy. They set out what is true so that we can recognise any distortions we come across. For example, in the Nicene Creed, we firmly exclude the idea from Arius that Jesus is less divine than the Father: ‘We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father...’ This is why we say these things. To secure the fence down the side of the road of orthodox Christian belief.

So where does this orthodox Christian belief come from? How do we know that these things are true? The answer is that we work them out from looking at what God has caused to be set down in the Scriptures. This is what Bible study is for. This is why people write books about the Bible. This is why we gather to discuss the Bible in small groups. To help us get more of this overall picture about what the Bible as as whole teaches us.

Our two readings today, for example, are very explicit in what they say about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the end of 2 Corinthians, Paul concludes with a very well-known trinitarian formula as he expresses his desire for God to bless his Christian friends there. And in today’s Gospel reading, we have Jesus himself being clear about how his followers are to be baptized ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’.

Looking at passages like this led the early Christians to come up with the word ‘Trinity’ to describe what the Bible reveals about who God is. Yes, God is one in what, to use a technical term, his ‘substance’ or ‘being’. And yes, God is three. Three ‘persons’, to use another technical term. And so the Creed goes on to set this out in a bit more detail. God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But as far as eternity, glory and majesty are concerned, he is one. In terms of who God is, he is three. In terms of what God is, he is one.

We shall never understand fully, of course. There’s a sense in which God will always remain unconquerably mysterious and incomprehensible. Not entirely so, but significantly so. For, at the end of the day, our job is not so much to analyse as to worship and adore. Not so much to question as to love and trust. Not to dissect but to serve and obey. This is what our appreciation of Christian doctrine is intended to lead to.

And so, to echo the words of St Richard of Chichester, whose festival we celebrated on Thursday, let us continue to pray, ‘may we know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly and follow thee more nearly, day by day’. Amen.