

# Holy, Holy, Holy

## (Tune: NICEA)

### The Text : Learning and Understanding It

The great poet Alfred Lord Tennyson called this the greatest hymn in the English language. In the church where I grew up, it was sung every Sunday morning as the opening processional hymn. (Needless to say, many of us soon had it memorized!)

Find the hymn in your own church hymnal. Since it is probably already familiar, sing it through, noticing:

- which word occurs most frequently, and
- how many times that word is sung each time it appears.

Look up this word in a dictionary. Why do you think the author repeated it in this particular way? Read again the final line of the hymn. Does that give you a clue? Discuss briefly the meaning of “Trinity,” but leave further discussion until later.

In your Bibles read together the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation. What words or phrases do you find here that are also in the hymn? (Bible scholars differ on the meaning of this book of the Bible. Ask your pastor for guidance.) Look also at the first three verses of the sixth chapter of Isaiah in the Old Testament.

Other questions to consider:

- Who are “all the saints?”
- Who are the cherubim and seraphim (or, as some Bibles have it, seraphs)? Are they different from the saints?
- How would we say “wert and art” in today’s language? What does that phrase say about God?
- In stanza three, what “darkness” may hide God’s glory today?
- Putting it another way, what things might keep us from being as close to God as we should want to be?

### The Author

Reginald Heber, who lived from 1783 to 1826, wrote this hymn to be sung after the Nicene Creed on Trinity Sunday. The Nicene Creed, created in the year 325 at the Council of Nicea, was the first to define the doctrine of the Trinity as central to the Christian faith. Find a copy of this creed and compare it to the more familiar Apostles’ Creed. For more information, search the Internet for “Council of Nicea.”

Great pieces of church music were often written for specific Sundays of the church year. J. S. Bach’s many cantatas were each written for a special day and made reference to the Bible lessons

for that day. Might your choir look ahead to a certain Sunday and write new words to a familiar tune to be sung on that day?

Heber had grown up in a wealthy and cultured family and was reading the Bible and quoting chapters and verses by the age of five! He studied at Oxford University and spent sixteen years as pastor (“vicar”) at his family’s estate. It was during those years that he wrote all of his hymns. He was then appointed Bishop of Calcutta—including all of India, Ceylon and Australia. After several years of intense work and travel, he died suddenly at the age of forty-two.

Two other well-loved hymns of Heber are “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains” and “Brightest and Best of the Sons of the Morning.” Is either of them in your hymnal? Another found in some hymnals is “Bread of the World in Mercy Broken.” Look up Heber’s name in the author index of your hymnal to see how many of his hymns are there.

### The Composer

John Bacchus Dykes lived from 1823 to 1876. At the age of ten, he was already playing the organ in the church where his grandfather was pastor (vicar). He studied at Cambridge (the other great English University) and became a pastor himself. He published sermons and articles on religion as well as music, but it is for his more than three hundred hymn tunes that he is best known.

It is hard to imagine “Holy, Holy, Holy” sung to any other tune, but it was first paired with a tune by John Hopkins which begins with the same five notes at the one by Dykes. But Dykes’ tune was written especially for this text and named NICEA after the creed which inspired the words.

Can you sing the first two measures of the melody with tonal syllables or scale numbers? Then try to add the next two measures.

Most hymnals print this hymn in four lines of four measures each. Which two lines are most alike? Can you find the one difference in the tune in those two lines? Sing each one in turn, with syllables if possible.

### Music as “Bearer of the Word”

Sometimes we speak of music as one art which may “express the inexpressible.” That is especially true of this tune. Getting back to the word “Trinity,” how can Father, Son and Holy Spirit be just ONE GOD?

Here is an introduction to “Holy, Holy, Holy” which your choir might use in a worship service to introduce the hymn and which illustrates the Trinity in a unique way.

Divide the choir into three equal parts and learn the first two measures first. Note that the lower voice sings the first “Holy,”

PART I  
Ho - ly, mer - ci - ful and might - y,

PART II  
Ho - ly, ho - ly,

PART III  
Ho - ly, ho - ly,

God in three per - sons, bless - ed Trin - i - ty!

God in three per - sons, bless - ed Trin - i - ty!

God in three per - sons, bless - ed Trin - i - ty!

Words by Reginald Heber, 1783-1826. Music by John B. Dykes, 1823-1876.

the middle voice the second, and the top voice the third.

Each part holds its note while the others sing theirs. In the second measure we then have made a **chord** called a “triad” – a chord of three notes. Note each fermata (hold). It will enable you to enjoy that chord a bit longer each time you get to it.

It is just **one chord**, but each note is so important that it can’t be a chord without all three. Three notes—one chord. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—**ONE GOD**.

Then in the fifth measure all three parts come together to sing the same unison tune. The three have literally become one melody. In the same way, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are truly One “God in three Persons.”

Just one musical suggestion: When singing the second syllable of “Holy,” keep your mouth in the shape of the first syllable (O). For the upper voice, the last part of “mighty” should be sung with the same round mouth shape. That will keep a beautiful sound for the EE vowels.

When this study is complete, continue to practice the three-voice introduction each week until the group is confident enough to use it in Sunday worship. Consult with your pastor or other worship planner as to an appropriate service for this hymn to be sung. (It is really a fitting opening hymn for almost any morning service.)

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# The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

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.  
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation

he came down from heaven:

by the power of the Holy Spirit

he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again

in accordance with the Scriptures;

he ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.

He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,

and the life of the world to come. Amen.