the holy trinity

father
son
holy spirit

Every Sunday and major Holy Day we say the Creed – the statement of our belief. What we believe with all other Christians (groups who don't sign up to the Creed are not really part of the Church) **comes in three paragraphs, because all that we understand about GOD concerns three characters – the three named above.**

the gold, silver and bronze?

Which of these three is the most important?
Well, judging by the length of the second paragraph of the creed, we'd say Jesus – the **SON** is.
But then we realise that this is because we have seen so much more of Jesus: we know him by the name **GOD–WITH–US**.
That doesn't necessarily make him the most important!

If we judge by the way the three relate to each other, we can see that there is an order of some sort. The Son is seated at the right hand of the Father, not the other way round! And the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.
[The *and the Son* bit is an addition found in the Creed in the Western or Catholic Church. It may disappear again one day!] The life of the Spirit is dependent upon the Father.

But this order is not like talking about first, second and third place in a race!

what's our experience?

When we ask ourselves which of the three do I actually take most seriously, most of us would answer Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
He is the Person that Christians concentrate on most, simply because he is most real to us. After all, we know that he was a real person just like ourselves – breathing, eating, walking, talking, weeping and praying. Although he lived a long time ago in a faraway place he is still REAL to us and we can KNOW this PERSON – for in some mysterious way he is alive NOW.

By contrast, the Holy Spirit seems far too mysterious!
And the Father whom no man has seen…at any time (John 1:18) **is also a Person we hardly know – and because in the Old Testament he often seems angry and distant, what little we know we may not like!**

but:

Jesus himself in his earthly life did know the Father and have a relationship with the Spirit (as you might expect). He was as human as you and me and yet he was able to know them.

Chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel describe this relationship in a wonderful way – have a look at them.

Through Jesus too we can come to have a richer relationship with God our Father (as Jesus called him and taught us to pray) and with the Holy Spirit.

Our early experience as Christians may be to know Jesus and be uncertain about the others. Yet if we stay with Jesus we will find that he shows us more of his divine partners.

the great puzzle: 1 + 1 + 1 = 1

So we can get to know three persons.
But our Creed says We believe in ONE God.
How can ONE God be THREE people?

Sorry, but the first thing to say about this only adds to the confusion:
God is three PERSONS, but NOT three PEOPLE.

"Person" when we talk about God means three different qualities or aspects of God. The best way to explain these qualities of God is to see them as three distinct personal realities (it even seemed like this to Jesus, see Matthew 27:46).

We understand that these characteristics or values are at the heart of what God is, but we have to move on from seeing God just as *an old man with a white beard* or *a young man with long hair* or *a white dove*. These are just the best attempts to see what is beyond us.
Jesus teaches us that the three personal realities of God are not simply three people.

THREE IN ONE

The Church has ALWAYS been troubled by the question: do you believe in three Gods or one God?
The great discovery that the Jews had made before (we see them making it in the Old Testament) is that there is only ONE God who is Lord of all.

Despite this, the first A.D. people found no problem in thinking of God as Trinity, without having to define this too closely – **let's look at 2 Corinthians 13:14**

As time went on, inevitably Christians began to try to pin it all down and came up with all sorts of theories about how three persons and one God *works*.
And the result of all this work was THE CREED.
More and more the Church has realised that there is nothing that can be said about ONE of the three persons that can't be said about ALL THREE:
e.g. we usually think of God the Father as the one who created the world. But John 1 and Colossians 1:16 give credit to Jesus the Son (also known as the **word of God** for he makes God known), whilst Genesis 1:2 includes the Holy Spirit too.

All three have **ALL** the characteristics of God and they work in complete harmony all the time. Within God there is this mysterious interaction, for God is love (1 John 4:8) and we all know how mysterious love is.

VISUAL AID

So how can we think of Father, Son and Holy Spirit being all-in-one-God together and yet being revealed to us as a distinct three?

Here's one suggestion:
We all know what traffic lights look like: there are three lights (red, amber and green) which together do the job they are supposed to. Now, it's tempting to think of Father, Son and Holy Spirit being like those three coloured lights…tempting, but WRONG!
It suggests the Father does one thing, the Son the next and the Spirit the third.

However, today at most junctions on the road we rarely see just one set of lights. We pull up and see a set right where we are, one on the far side of the junction, and maybe one high in the air above our lane. They ALL have red, amber and green, and they all work and agree at the same time. The only reason there are three is so that WE have more opportunities to see what we NEED TO SEE FROM WHERE WE ARE. This is how it is with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We never really come across one without the others.

not the whole story

Christians are unique in understanding God as Trinity.
Many writers have explored this mystery and continually found great richness in it.
And yet, what they have always said too is that God being three-in-one means there is always so much more to God than we can possibly think.
In one way we can know God like a friend, in another our knowledge in this life can only be partial.

Here's what St Cyril (Bishop of Jerusalem about 1500 years ago) had to say:
We explain not what God is; but we honestly confess that we have no exact knowledge of Him. For on the subject of God, it is great knowledge to confess our WANT of knowledge.