

TRINITY SUNDAY 3rd JUNE 2012 (Year B)
Sermon by Revd James Dickinson

Lord, open our eyes that we may behold your glory; draw us into the mystery that is the Holy Trinity and into the circle of love. This I ask in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day traditionally when those who don't have to preach breathe a sigh of relief. You can almost see the smirks on the faces of Fr Nigel, Fr Keith and Heather. Yet, to be honest, it is a great privilege and a very humbling experience to be given the opportunity to attempt, through a sermon, to say something about the Holy Trinity, inadequate though it will always be.

You won't find the word Trinity in the Bible. The word means three or threeness and was first used in reference to the biblical revelation of God, by Tertullian, a third century theologian. It was in the fourth century that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was formulated by theologians and bishops to teach Christian people about the true nature of God as revealed in and through Jesus and experienced by the Spirit-filled Church. The Holy Trinity proclaims God as three persons in one: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Within that Godhead there is both diversity and unity.

If we read our New Testaments carefully and prayerfully we see Jesus as God's eternal Son, taking humanity upon him and sharing a human life. We see him in close relationship with his heavenly Father at all times, particularly noticeable in St John's Gospel. We see Jesus bestowing the Holy Spirit on the chosen disciples at Pentecost and the effects this gift has upon them. The Church was aware of a creator God who was to be obeyed; the Church was aware that Jesus was the incarnate Lord who had shown them what God was like and had redeemed them from sin and death. The Church was aware that God's dynamic Holy Spirit was working in them. To refer to God therefore as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – as creator, saviour and strengthener – was natural. Three ways of experiencing one God is, therefore, what we mean by the Holy Trinity – it is our attempt to explain the unexplainable.

One of the fourth century theologians of the Eastern Church, St Gregory of Nyssa, said something very profound: *'God is not so much an object to be understood, but a mystery to be loved'*. There is no point in trying to explain God – we do not have the breadth of mind to comprehend the One who is the source of all being. Explanations and solutions are not appropriate here. How can we define the relationship of pure love which we believe is at the heart of the mystery which is God the Holy Trinity? But what we can do, in all humility, is worship and adore the One God who has given us everything and who invites us into his circle of love, as we shall see.

One very deep way in which people have endeavoured to draw closer to God, to have a glimpse of his glorious majesty, is through the veneration of icons – images which are meant to be a window into the very presence of God. Probably the best-loved of all icons is Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity, often referred to as the OT Trinity, though it is more accurately called 'The Hospitality of Abraham'. (Each of you here this morning has been given a colour print of this famous fifteenth century Russian icon.) It is based on the story in Genesis 18 of the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre. From an early age Christians have taken this mysterious story as a foreshadowing of the revelation that God is three persons who in reality are one. The three angels in the Genesis story represent, we are told, an appearance of 'the Lord'; they speak and act as one.

Icons are designed to be at the heart of a worshipping community. So let us consider Rublev's icon. We are not only looking at three angels with their wings visible, but at an image interpreted as the glorious Trinity. Each of the figures possesses the fullness of the Godhead. They are equal, with a timeless quality; they are neither male nor female; their halos depict holiness; they have similar faces, figures and hair-styles – only their clothing differentiates them. Each of them lives for the others; they are in a perfect relationship of unity and communion. Their stillness draws us into our own sense of stillness.

There is a circle implicit in the design – a circle is a symbol of perfection, unity and eternity, having no beginning and no end. Because of the curve of their bodies and the inclination of their heads, the movement flows in an anti-clockwise direction. It is impossible to make full-face contact with the figures; their gaze directs us onwards in this circular motion – there is no place for our eyes to stop. But there is a space in the base of the circle by the table. The viewer, you or me, is drawn forward to step into the space – to enter the circle, the circle of love. God the Holy Trinity is inviting us to enter his very presence – to worship and adore.

In this icon, heaven touches earth. The Trinity is seated in the heavenly realms, but with a footstool on earth, represented by the green of the ground beneath their feet.

Although, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one in essence, there are individual distinctions, so let us look at each of the three figures. Following the movement of the circle let us begin with the figure

on the right, the Holy Spirit. He is the one who leads us in and interprets the life of God to us. He is dressed in a blue tunic with a lovely light green mantle. Blue is in icon terms the colour of heaven and divinity. Green is the liturgical colour of Pentecost in the Orthodox Church and the symbolic colour of the Holy Spirit –the Spirit who breathes life wears colours that speak of creation and freshness. His right hand gives the impression not only of blessing the cup of sacrifice but also of blessing downwards - breathing the life of God into us his creation. His action is to transform us and through him we are invited to experience new life in Christ.

Above the Spirit is a mountain –a place of encounter with God, where Moses received the law, where Isaac was offered in sacrifice, where Christ was Transfigured.

The work of the Spirit is to reveal God the Father through God the Son and so the curvature of the body and the bowed head of this figure on the right draw us into the circle and lead us towards the central figure who is Christ.

Christ is dressed in a robe of reddish brown, the colour of earth denoting his humanity. He has a band of gold across his shoulder denoting kingship and a mantle of blue draped over him representing his divinity. His robes convey to us that Christ is the person who unites heaven and earth –divine and human meet in him. This is Jesus, God incarnate, sent by the Father to be the redeemer of the world.

Two fingers of the Son's right hand are extended in blessing over the cup of sacrifice. If you look at the icon through a ring, you will see that the hand of Christ is the central point of the circle. The chalice contains the head of the fatted calf which Abraham, in the story, killed to feed his guests –this is a prototype of Christ the Lamb of God whose blood was shed for the life of the world, a reminder also of the sacramental sharing of his body and blood. In the icon, either side of Christ you can see the shape of a chalice –a further reminder of the Eucharist. Above Christ's head is a tree, which not only represents the oaks of Mamre in the Abraham story but also the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. It also reminds us of the cross of shame on which our Lord was crucified which is also the tree of glory on which our salvation was won. Christ directs his gaze of love and obedience towards the receptive figure of God the Father, to the left.

The figure of God the Father has an air of mystery about him. Over his blue garment representing his divine nature he wears an iridescent robe of pink and brown with hues of blue and green. Jesus in St John's Gospel reminds us that no one has seen the Father. The Father's gaze is turned towards the other two and in directing his gaze back to them he contributes to the circular motion. The Father exists to give life eternally to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. The Son and the Spirit, in turn, are giving themselves to the Father. Each person of the Trinity lives for the others in perfect interdependence and so the Father, too, blesses the cup of sacrifice and the mission his Son will accomplish. Above the Father's head is a temple with an open door towards which both the tree and the mountain lean. This is perhaps symbolic that one day there will be a consummation of all things in the eternal home of the Father.

The table or altar at the centre of the icon is both the place of hospitality given to the angels in the Abraham story and God's place of hospitality that he generously offers to us. The Trinity is not in an exclusive relationship –there is a space open on our side of the table so that we can enter and join in. In the front side of the altar, there is a small rectangular box. This may be a reliquary where the relics of martyrs are deposited –people who have laid down their lives for Christ. Or the box could be the place where the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ is reserved. In different ways, they are both an invitation to humanity –to you and to me –to come to the altar.

There are more symbols in this icon than have been mentioned and there is more than one way in which these symbols can be interpreted. However, this wonderful and beautiful icon allows us a glimpse, however inadequate, into the nature and presence of the Holy Trinity –a mystery which in this life we will never understand. But God in his Triune wisdom gives us everything that we need to love him as our creator our redeemer and sustainer. Even in times of adversity, whether we know it or not, he provides us with what is both necessary and sufficient. He wants us to reflect in our lives the relationship of love which exists in his. As we contemplate the glorious Trinity we are reminded that the very reason we are created is that, we too, in this world, can reflect that relationship of love in all that we do. May we always be conscious that, just as we are, we are invited into the circle of love that is the Holy Trinity; and bow our heads in awe, wonder and thanksgiving.

I am going to place the icon on the reading desk. As we come up for communion we may imagine ourselves taking our place at the table, completing the circle, and receiving Christ, the second person of the Trinity, into our souls and bodies so that we too may be a living sacrifice sent out in his power and glory today and every day unto the ages of ages. Amen

James Dickinson, Newbold, Trinity Sunday, 3rd June 2012

