

Trinity Sunday, 2018.

Readings: Isaiah 6: 1-8; Ps 2; Romans 8:12-17; John 3 1-17



Trinity Sunday completes the first part of the church year and gives a sure foundation for the equally vital vibrant second half. Two images might help us think about Trinity. The first is Rublev's 16<sup>th</sup> century icon of the well at Mamre, Genesis 18. It shows Abraham and Sara's vision of three angels, or two angels and God. But it also represents the Trinity, the Father in near-purple, Jesus in sacrificial red, and the Spirit in life-empowering green. A second image shows the one Great Light made up of three candles, their flames merging against the darkness, illuminating and saving the world and inspiring us to continue the revelation of God on earth through our lives. God as One Light challenges our human tendency to create God in our own personal image: I'll come back to Rublev's triple imagery later.

The centrality of the Trinity was the subject matter of a long poem by the priest and poet John Donne some 400 years ago: for him, it is the loadstar of faith, albeit a treasure trove for tendentious philosophising:

Oh blessed and glorious Trinity,  
bones to philosophy, but milk to faith.

As Donne makes clear, philosophers and theologians have often made a dog's dinner of what should nurture rather than confuse our faith. One problem is in seeing Creator, Redeemer and Comforter as three separate Gods yet somehow one, which is implied in Rublev's icon. Another is seeing Spirit God as an afterthought rather than present at creation. That last point is neatly dismissed by Athanasius, an early church Father. His creed is sometimes used

to mock Trinity's conceptual complexity, in lines such as: 'not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.' Yet crucially, he continues: 'and in this Trinity none is afore or after another: none is greater or less than another.'

Not only is there no internal ranking in the Trinity of Creator, Redeemer and Comforter, there is no gender either, enabling each of us to be made in God's image. Despite this, God-Father is commonly envisioned as male, a view challenged by the early Syrian writer St Ephrem, whose hymn neatly mixes male and female attributes in the Trinity:

He is the Living breast of living breath;  
By his life the dead were suckled and they revived...  
He has given suck-life to the universe,  
As again he dwelt in His mother's womb  
In His womb dwells all creation.

This is confusing only if we insist God Creator has size 12 shoes and a beard, and milk is a fluid coming only from female mammals! Surely God Christ, God Creator, God Spirit, gestates us all, just as and the milk of human kindness should flow to all.

A wise Christian understanding of God sees us as made in the image of a relating, interacting, interweaving God, challenging us to follow the path of a changing *yet* eternally solid God. In so living, as Donne puts it, we follow the 'sociableness and communicableness of God, with power love and knowledge undistinct.' A static image of three God-figures at a safe distance helps avoid the risk of engagement, rebuff, uncertainty: but that is not life lived in God. Today's Collect talks of 'our participating in the dance of the Trinity.' Rublev's Christ looks at the Creator with his eyes yet turns his body to the Comforter, who in turn looks both at the chalice and the other two figures. The three aspects of God are thus relating, and must relate, just as blood, flesh and bone interact to make a living body.

God in Trinity is indeed "milk to our faith." But the question is: how do we intend, having received and accepted the giftings of God, to pass them out and on to others? Might today's readings help us polish our little diamond of faith in the green months to come?

Isaiah's vision of the hem of God's robe, replete with redeeming angels, has him responding to God's question 'whom shall I send,' with 'Here I am, send me,' much as the child Samuel had responded. Not 'well, I guess I am here but why not pick out someone else, please,' but simply 'yes, I am here.' The Epistle speaks explicitly of God Abba, Christ Son, and God Spirit guiding us not backwards in fear, but forwards in confidence. And the Gospel makes

clear that the Spirit gives us the capacity to understand if we wish to hear, a fact lost on Nicodemus the teacher of Israel whom Jesus tried in vain to teach.

But back to those two images. The simplest one for *thinking* about God is the three candles, One Light encompassing three equal Lights. Yet for *living*, the interacting figures of the icon say more, teaching us how to live out the Trinity in life. This means, for example, not expelling citizens and others with the right to live here; it means not cold-shouldering those who think, dress or eat differently; it means not ignoring the social and moral consequences of long-term extreme poverty in this country. Remember, it is not just the exiled, the isolated, the poor who are diminished by such unchristian behaviour, but each person who silently colludes.

Rowan Williams poetically summarises Rublev's icon:

I shall...never let you forth

To the white desert, to the starving sand.

But we shall sit and speak around

One table, share one food, one earth

Losing none in deserts of rejection, may we all grow in the learning and the love of God.

Collect for Trinity Sunday

O God our mystery, you bring us to life, call us to freedom, and move between us with love.

May we so participate in the dance of your trinity that our lives may resonate with you, now and for ever, Amen.

From: *All Desires Known*. Janet Morley, SPCK 1992