

Trinity Sunday

St Mary's, Barnes

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This is a reproduction of a 15th century icon by Andrei Rublev, which now hangs in the Tretykov gallery in Moscow. I will take this sermon fairly slowly, with pauses, so that you can contemplate it. The great tradition of Byzantine art, centred on Constantinople was carried North by Christian missionaries and this led to a new flowering in Russia. We notice the elegant folds in the garments of the angels, and the loveliness of their heads, and we can see here a Christianised expression of the classical ideal of beauty going back to the 5th century BC in Athens.

This icon has its origin in the story recounted in Genesis 18. Abraham and Sarah are approached by three strangers, and they offer them a meal. These strangers turn out to be angels. So the first name for it is “The Hospitality of Abraham”. Earlier depictions of the scene in Rome and Ravenna show that narrative in more detail but in this Icon we have only fragments of it in the house and the oak tree of Mamre where they lived. It has become less a story and more an aid to contemplation, conveying as it does an extraordinary serenity and joy.

From an early age the church saw in these three angels a prefiguring of God as Holy Trinity. Of course God in himself is totally incomprehensible and unknowable, but he makes himself known to us in ways appropriate to our limited finite minds, in symbolic form. So it is that the second name for this icon is “The Old Testament Trinity.”

The main characteristic of this icon as depicted by Rublev is the beauty of its circular flow. The Angel in the centre leans towards the one on our left, who turns towards to the one on our right, whose gesture it turn reflects the one opposite whilst also leaning towards the one in the centre. Our eyes are led round and round again. God is one, as a later write put it, “A circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” But God without ceasing to be one has disclosed himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit - three modes or forms of being, and the central figure in this Icon has usually been taken to be the Son. The Son looks to the Father, for all that the Son has comes from the Father, whilst the Father is reflected in the Holy Spirit, who himself points to the Son in one everlasting circle of love.

When I saw this Icon some years ago in the Communist Soviet Union, the Marxist based catalogue said of the angels in this Icon

‘Their flowing gestures and delicately inclined heads imply a sense of profound unanimity and universal love. This, essentially is the icon’s emotional message which extends far beyond its theological interpretation.’

But of course it does not go beyond its theological interpretation. It expresses it, for that “profound unanimity and universal love” resides in God himself from whom all human love derives.

The three figures sit around a table, a table in which there is a vacant place in front. The viewer is being invited to share this life of love.

For this icon, like the Doctrine of the Trinity itself is not there to tell us about God but to draw us into its life, to welcome us and enable us to share it in all our daily doings.

This invitation is not cost free. On the table is a chalice, and we are reminded of the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

“Father take this cup from me, but nevertheless not my will but thine be done.” In some depictions there is also a lamb on the table, here what appears to be just the head of one in the chalice, a reminder that the lamb of God was indeed sacrificed to save humanity from its own self destruction.

So the hospitality of Abraham become the hospitality of God, the God who comes amongst us in Jesus; who invites us to live in him and so to live out the Divine Life. Looking to Jesus and seeking to follow him we are taken into the Father and filled with the Father’s Spirit. As Jesus says in today’s Gospel “All that the Father has is mine, and that is why I said “He will take what is mine and make it known to you.” And as Paul put it in today’s epistle “Through the Holy Spirit he has given us, God’s love has flooded our hearts.” We were baptised into this life, and we have made it our own in faith. Every time we leave church we are blessed again in the name of that Holy Trinity.

At this Eucharist we are especially conscious of being one of those for whom there is a place at the table, of being welcomed in, of being drawn into the life of God himself; of a holy union, a Holy Communion.

But not only here. Every meal is a Holy Union with God and with others in God. And not only meals. For moment by moment God invites us to take our place at table in the great feast of life-and to

open out hearts to the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

It is not surprising that in the light of belief in the hospitality of God, hospitality has been a key marker of Christian identity from the first. Both at an individual and an institution level. The Church founded hostels for wayfarers and pilgrims, usually based on monasteries. The Greek for hospitality is philoxenia - love of strangers, it is the opposite of xenophobia, hatred of strangers. As a church and individuals we are to be characterised by philoxenia. We are called to live out the hospitality of God in all our dealings with others, being open, welcoming, inviting. There is a place for them in our heart as there is a place for us in the heart of God.