

Sermon – *In the Footsteps of the Apostles – Trinity*

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Athelstone Uniting Church #69

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Text: Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15 NIV



Prayer of Illumination

O God, the Three in One,
you draw us into your community of love
with people across the ages and around the world.
By the same Spirit that draws us together
speak to us that what we hear and contemplate
may give us life and hope
and stretch us to trust and follow you;
through Christ our Savior. Amen.¹

Intro

Today is the Sunday designated as Trinity Sunday.

¹ ~ based on a prayer from a collection posted on
the **Worship@North** website. <https://northchurchindy.wordpress.com/>

This is a time to wonder at the mystery of God as three-in-one and one-in-three; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

in churches around the world preachers are grappling with this doctrine, or perhaps avoiding it!

Why avoid it? Because the Trinity is mystery, hard to understand, tricky,

Yet it is important to tackle it because this is the God we worship and it is good to spend some time thinking about the nature of our God.

Mystery

Trinity – one in three, three in one.

We are talking about a matter of doctrine – something humans have come up with to try to explain or understand, in this case, the nature of God.

the doctrine of the Trinity is:

1. The Father is God
2. The Son is God
3. The Holy Spirit is God
4. And yet there are not three Gods, but one God

Poet Malcolm Guite said: "By coming to us as the Son, revealing to us the Father, and sending to us the Spirit, Jesus revealed the deepest mystery; that God is not distant and alone, but is three in one, a communion of love who comes to make His home with us."²

God is mystery. Indefinable, indescribable.

Catherine LaCugna says:

"the God who is absolutely other, absolutely transcendent but also absolutely near to us – this God is absolute mystery."

Yet, here I am on trying to help you understand our God – perhaps just a little more – by focussing on the image of the Trinity.

I mentioned Malcolm Guite – I first heard him speak when I was at a summer school in Oxford in 2015. That is when I discovered that I enjoy the word pictures that poetry can evoke.

² Malcolm Guite

He has a blog in which he shared his poetry, including recordings of him reading his work.

Anyway, here is a sonnet that he wrote for Trinity Sunday.

Close your eyes and listen ..

A Sonnet

In the Beginning, not in time or space,
But in the quick before both space and time,
In Life, in Love, in co-inherent Grace,
In three in one and one in three, in rhyme,
In music, in the whole creation story,
In His own image, His imagination,
The Triune Poet makes us for His glory,
And makes us each the other's inspiration.

He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,
To improvise a music of our own,
To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,
Three notes resounding from a single tone,
To sing the End in whom we all begin;
Our God beyond, beside us and within.³

You can open your eyes again..

In this sonnet, Guite attempts to describe the triune God

- Uncreated
- Present before there was time or space
- Three in one, one in three

³ Malcolm Guite

- A community of love
- Created us for his glory
- In his image, his imagination,
- Calls us, invites us out of the darkness
- Into the dance
- Our God who is beyond – the Creator – the Father - majestic, awe-inspiring, transcendent
- Our God who is beside us – the Word – the Son – the one who became one of us
- Our God who is within – Breath, Spirit, Power, Comforter – the one who is here among us, within us today – revealing God to us through his Word.



so this week, I should have thought to ask for a pair of dance shoes! Ballet or tap or Irish.. as the image for us.. as we walk in the footsteps of the apostles – this week joining in the dance of the Trinity!

The texts

The texts this week all point to the trinity in some way:

Psalm 9, speaks of God as Creator:

Our Lord who is Majestic, Creative and Glorious - and if we go searching we find mention of both the Spirit and the Word being present at the time of creation in Genesis and in John 1.

Romans 5, speaks of our relationship with God:

We have peace with God *through Jesus* - an act of grace

God's love is poured out into our hearts *through the Holy Spirit*

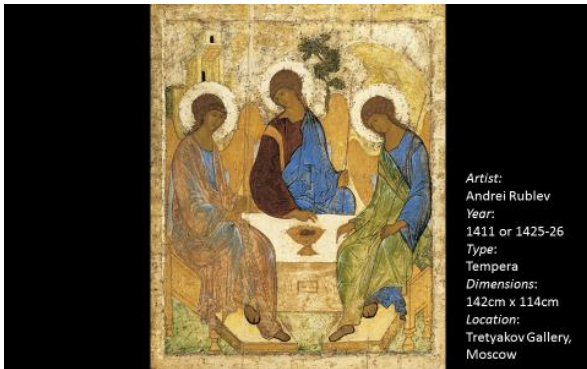
The Message paraphrase speaks of our generous God - The one who initiates - Who invites

John 16 speaks of the Spirit of truth who will guide us and glorify Jesus.

I love this in the Message paraphrase:

But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. ⁴

Today, I want to show you an image of the Friend offering that hand – in the form of an icon.



Rublev's icon

Andrei Rublev created this icon back in the early 1400s.

Originally entitled *The Hospitality of Abraham* it was painted for the abbot of the Trinity Monastery in Russia. Rublev portrayed what has now become the classic icon of the Holy Trinity by depicting the three mysterious strangers who visited Abraham (Genesis 18:1-15).

I want you to try to imagine that this icon is this big (indicate size) and that you are standing right in front of it, taking in the detail.

The image is full of symbolism – as icons do - designed to take the viewer into the Mystery of the Trinity.

Many in Rublev's culture were confused by the doctrine of the Trinity and others rejected it altogether. Rublev's Trinity showed them a lovely understanding of God as Three-in-One that

⁴ (John 16:12-15 MSG)

is beyond trying to “figure out.” Almost 600 years later Rublev’s icon continues to draw people into the mysterious and wonderful presence of the Trinity.

It is considered one of the highest achievements of Russian art and is now hanging in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

In the Genesis 18 account the Lord visits Abraham in the form of three men who are apparently angels representing God.

We have talked about angels before – as messengers. But I believe these angels are different – these ones are depicted as a manifestation of God in angel form. This appearance is said to be the closest hint there is of the Trinity in the Old Testament.

Abraham bows low to the ground before his three visitors and they speak to Abraham in union and are alternatively referred to by the Genesis writer as “they” or “the Lord.” Abraham offers them the hospitality of foot washing, rest under a shade tree, and a meal and they offered him the announcement that God was going to give he and his wife Sarah a son, though Sarah was far past the age of having children.

In Rublev’s icon painting he depicts the three heavenly visitors sitting at a table with a cup placed before them on the table. We recognise them as angels – messengers – with staffs and wings. Most scholars understand the figures to be seated left to right in their doxological order of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Others had painted this Biblical story, but Rublev was the first to paint only the three angelic figures and to make them of equal size. Rublev depicts the three as One Lord. Each holds a staff in his left hand, symbolizing their equality. Each wears a cloak of blue, the color of divinity. And the face of each is exactly the same, depicting their oneness.

The Father is like the figure on the left. His divinely blue tunic is cloaked in a color that is light and almost transparent because he is the hidden Creator. There is an ephemeral translucent quality to it. With his right he blesses the Son – he is pleased with his beloved. His head is the only one that is lifted high and yet his gaze is turned to the other two figures.

The Son is portrayed in the middle figure. The colours are opaque, solid – he is the One we can really see as human. He wears both the blue of divinity and reddish purple and stole of royal priesthood. He is the King who gives up his power to serve as priest to the people he created and to become part of them. With his hand he blesses the cup he is to drink, accepting his readiness to sacrifice himself for humanity. His head is bowed in submission to the Father on the left.

He is pointing to the Spirit on the right – who is also translucent and ephemeral like the Father.

Over his divinely blue tunic the Spirit wears a cloak of green, symbolizing life and regeneration. His hand is resting on the table next to the cup, suggesting that he will be with the Son as he carries out his mission. His head is inclined toward the Father and the Son. His gaze is toward the open space at the table.

A warning: We can look upon the Icon of the Holy Trinity and contemplate the relationship of the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit, yet we must not try to concentrate too much on the Three figures as separate beings.

Can you see a circular movement in the icon of Father, Son, and Spirit? The icon shows us, not the three individuals of the Trinity, but the relationship between them. The Son and the Spirit incline their heads toward the Father and he directs his gaze back at them. The Father blesses the Son, the Son accepts the cup of sacrifice, the Spirit comforts the Son in his mission, and the Father shows he is pleased with the Son. Love is initiated by the Father, embodied by the Son, and accomplished through the Spirit. Love is the energy flowing between them.

I read that light in icons represents love. – those halos represent love. If you look carefully you might see that their faces are lit – the light is actually coming from their eyes. – light or love coming from the windows of their souls.

The table is an altar – set with a cup or chalice right in the centre – the cup of sacrifice.

if you look hard you can even picture the figure of the Son in a chalice – that is the real cup!

The icon is designed to reflect on as a spiritual discipline. The more you look, the more you see.

There is deep theological significance in everything – all purposefully placed – intentionally so.

When you stand in front of the icon you can imagine that you are part of the community gathered around the table. Jesus looks at you. And the cup is between you.

Henri Nouwen said:

.. we come to experience a gentle invitation to participate in the intimate conversation that is taking place among the three divine angels and to join them around the table. The movement from the Father toward the Son and the movement of both Son and Spirit toward the Father become a movement in which (we can be) lifted up and held secure...

We come to see .. that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle... the house of perfect love⁵

When I look at this icon I see the invitation of the Trinity as a safe place to go. That each of the figures takes comfort in each other. There is a deep knowing among them. It is very peaceful. It is a relationship I feel drawn into.

It is a relationship we get to share with others – as those who are made in God's image, we too, take comfort in God and in one another, and we invite others to join us

The Triune God has both an intimate relationship amongst the persons of the Trinity as well as an open invitation to welcome others into the dance.

This act of divine hospitality shaped the life of early Christians and is a wonderful model for us today.

The Trinity speaks to us of

⁵ (*Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, p. 20-22).

Inclusiveness, hospitality, generosity, friendship, vulnerability, creativity and welcome

As well as difference, particularity, uniqueness and individuality

The Trinity is

a God who invites us into community

a God who respects and values unity and uniqueness

a God who demonstrates self-giving love

a God who has made space in his community of love for us

who sacrificed himself even when it was humanity who broke the covenant

who sent his Spirit to continue doing his work of revealing himself to us, inviting us into the divine life, pouring the love of God into our hearts and encouraging us to make room for more at the table so others can join in too.

I pray that you too may see this image of the Trinity as an invitation to the divine life of grace, peace and hope. .

Let me finish by reading the start of the Romans 5 passage from The Message:

5 ¹⁻² By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. *(Romans 5:1-2 MSG)*

Amen

Introduce How Great is our God

We began the service hearing the wonderful words of Psalm 8 – worshipping and glorifying our great and majestic God – let’s respond by singing our praises and look for the words describing our God of the Trinity..

Benediction

Go now, rejoicing in God the Trinity
joining in the dance
and delighting in all God does.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you all. Amen

(2 Cor 13:14 NIV)