

Trinity Sunday Sermon

given by Dr Margaret Dinely at St Margaret's, Rosyth,
on Jubilee Sunday, 3 June 2012

What a significant day this is – not only Trinity Sunday, which we celebrate annually, but also, in this year of 2012, it is Jubilee Sunday, when we are celebrating 60 years of our Queen's reign. So, although I am going to talk to you about the Trinity, I will let the messages I take from this reflect our *other* cause of celebration today. And I am going to approach the subject through the medium of a picture. They say that one picture is worth a thousand words – but, sorry, you're going to get the thousand words also.



We are all familiar with icons, the fact that they are images not intended for decoration or instruction to the illiterate, but as gateways to the Divine. There are rules about representation, including the symbolism of the colours and the faces *suggesting* emotions, such as love, pity or compassion, rather than showing them – and it is important to note that icons are born out of silence, prayer and devotion, worked on by people with faith.

So, today we are going to consider Rublev's icon of the Trinity – an icon that I have become passionately fond of in recent months and which speaks very movingly to me of something at the very heart of my faith. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an easy one to grasp. The persons of the Trinity are mentioned in the Bible, but the actual word is not used. For instance today we heard from Romans 8, "When we cry Abba! Father – it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ". A key Trinitarian moment, for example, one we are all familiar with, is the baptism of Christ, when as he comes from the water, the Spirit descends on him and the voice from heaven identifies him as His Son.

Today, as Jane Williams, wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, observes, the doctrine fits very well with "our current theological emphases and anxieties to stress that God is social, relational and loving". In my reflections and meditations on this icon I have been greatly helped by a delightful little book by Ann Persson entitled "The Circle of Love", which goes into much greater depth than there is time to share with you today.

The icon is based on a passage in Genesis ch 18, when Abraham is approached by three men, strangers, as he sits under the oaks of Mamre, in front of his tent, in the heat of the day. What does he do? He shows typical Middle Eastern hospitality, that "strangers should be welcomed as guests and should leave as friends". Later the three men become revealed as the Lord.

This story was seized on by iconographers in order to get over the prohibition on depicting the Father and Spirit, by using

it as a 'symbol of the Trinity and the hospitality at the heart of it'. This particular icon was made (written is the more correct term for the creation of an icon) in 1422 by a Russian monk as a commission for a newly-built stone church at the Monastery of St Sergius at Sergiev Posad, some 44 miles north-east of Moscow.

There is much symbolism in the icon, but I will just pick out some striking illustrations of this point. There is a distinctive symbolism, for example, in the garments worn by the three figures, the colours used identifying them as representing each member of the Trinity. The blue and green of the figure on the right make us think of creation, water, sky and vegetation, and the Spirit as the breath of life. The reddish-brown and blue of the robes of the central figure, symbolising earth and heaven, lead us to realise that this person is symbolising Jesus, the Son of God, and the hazy colours of the left-hand figure suggest the mystery surrounding God, the Father. Between the figures, who are looking toward each other, there is union and communion; it is a circle of love and of sharing hospitality, not just with each other, but extended out to the world. We see between them a plain table, ivory-coloured, with a chalice on it, which each figure appears to be blessing, but there is an openness to the front of the icon, to the front of this table. We are invited to be there – to come into this circle of love and hospitality, to feel drawn into the fellowship of the Trinity.

It is indeed a fellowship, a community of being, united in purpose, of one substance, but their particularities defined by their relationship to each other. We can pick out certain features that demonstrate this. The circle is a symbol of perfection, of unity, of eternity. We can see the divinity in the haloes, the staffs for authority, the wings seeming to form an enclosing curtain, emphasising the bond between them, also indicated in the positioning of their

heads. There is a quality of both stillness and movement, of timelessness – and their faces are both youthful and mature – and genderless.

What messages can we take for today from this icon, this representation of the Trinity? There are many possible messages, but on this Jubilee Sunday I will pick out a couple that seem relevant. Firstly, we are all being invited to join this community of being, to become enfolded within it. For us as Christians we can see this as a divine circle of love and we may be defined by our consciousness of this invitation, our desire to accept it and our notion of belonging to the divine plan. But in our earthly lives we also belong to another community of being – British society, a society still identified as a monarchy, even though we may be more aware of being ruled by a constitutional (or maybe not so constitutional) government. Just as Rublev took the story of the three strangers visiting Abraham under the oaks of Mamre to symbolise the three persons of the Trinity, so we may take the Queen and the Royal family as being symbols of the inherited (and Christian), values of the society in which we live out our daily lives – and indeed the Queen is the head of the Church of England, part of the Anglican Communion as we are ourselves. Of course, membership of British society is not generally a matter of invitation, but rather chance or a conscious decision to live here for other reasons. However, as we see in the icon the Father, Son and Holy Spirit moving and flowing and drawing life from one another in a bond of perfect love, so hopefully those Christian values represented by the Queen may help towards an imitation of this, albeit within our imperfect, flawed human state.

Secondly, we are *all* invited. This is a powerful message for inclusivity. We may be made in God's image, but we are all different – we have different views, needs, wishes. The Queen and the Royal family are

constantly visiting organisations around the country, numbers of them representing people who feel marginalised in society – and they make visits right across the globe. They do not concentrate their efforts purely on those of wealth, status or power – an important message for us. Rublev’s icon indeed reminds us that God, the Godhead of the three persons of the Trinity, invites every one of us into the circle of love. Remember how Jesus’ ministry was constantly to the marginalised of his society, including the sick in mind and body, prostitutes, religious outcasts, the poor – and women. Although today we can readily conjure up a list of marginalised people, such as drug addicts or the disabled, actually *any* of us can feel marginalised, perhaps cut off not only from others in society but from a meaningful existence, and from God.

As we give thanks for 60 years of our Sovereign’s rule, for the pleasure that she and her family give, either directly or through the media, let us rejoice that Rublev’s icon informs us of the even more stunning fact, that ***everyone***, without exception, is invited to join the circle of love of the Trinity.