



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Darren McFarland

Reading: John 3. 1-17

Like all good preachers and teachers I have a visual aid to what I want to say today. It is one of my favourite icons and may be familiar to all of you. It is on the front of your pew sheet this morning.



It is called “the Holy Trinity” although it is sometimes known as the Hospitality of Abraham. The icon was painted around 1410 by Andrei Rublev a monk of the Russian Orthodox Church. It depicts the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre, but is often interpreted as an icon of the Trinity, as many believe that Abraham’s visitors were the three persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Unsurprisingly, one of the first questions people ask about this icon is who is who; which angel represents which person of the Trinity. Although Rublev undoubtedly had in mind a particular way of differentiating the three figures, what is striking about the icon is that all three angels are portrayed equally. And even though most people see the Son in the centre, the Father on the left and the Spirit on the right, we cannot be certain that this was Rublev’s intention, and such debate really fails to recognize the purpose of the icon. For the icon is not there to provide

answers to theological questions, but is used in worship as a window, as an open door into the relationship of three persons who are God. As such, the icon transcends theological ideas. It does not seek to explain the relationship of the persons; rather, it enables the viewer to enter the life of the Trinity in worship.

And so, I cannot tell you what this icon means – no-one can. Meaning can only be discovered when we contemplate the icon as part of worship. When we look again, we can see that there is an empty place at the table. A place which cries out to be filled by the worshipper, a space for each of us to join the circle of love which is the life of the Trinity and become a member of that divine community. This icon, this understanding of God, this divine model teaches us that God does not exist in solitary individualism but in a community of love and of sharing. God is not a loner. The icon and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity show that true love requires three partners.

Now please don't think that the Church of England has gone even more liberal, I'm not suggesting that we should live the scandalous life of a ménage à trois, nor should we think of the old saying "Two's company, but three's a crowd." No, the Trinity shows us that three is community, three is love at its best; three is not a crowd. One of the places where the church celebrates relationship is in marriage, and who knows, one day we may do so in civil partnerships and in equal marriage. We think of marriage as being about two rather than three people. But is it? Marriage is certainly about love and community and relationship. It is about saying "no" to individualism, and yet it is about celebrating the individuals who are in relationship and who are in love. When we attend the weddings of friends and family we know what those individual personalities are like. They are part of why we love them and it may well be part of what exasperates us, but surely none of us can imagine that a marriage or the blessing of a relationship will in any way blot out the individual characteristics which make them the people they are and the people we love. It is however true that we are all different people when we are in relationship with another person. There will be times when the needs of the relationship take priority over those of the individual and there may be times when the opposite is true and dealing with that takes a great maturity. We have to recognise that even in relationship we remain individuals. So the icon teaches us that, for God, being in relationship is good. And as people who are made in God's image it is good for us to be in relationships whatever those relationships might be – friends, spouses, lovers, family members, fellow Christians. God blesses our relationships and God blesses us as individuals. Notice, also in the icon, the angels' attitudes and gestures towards each other. They relate to each other with an intense loving regard. And so it is that the love which is at the heart of the Trinity is a love which is reflected in a community of persons. For us as Christians, if we are to accept God's invitation to take our place at his table, then we must also accept the challenge to live our lives in a way which reflects that community of love. For this, surely, is what it means to live the Trinity: to mirror in our lives, our friendships, our relationships and partnerships, our society, our Church, and all the communities to which we belong, to mirror both the unity and the diversity of the Holy Trinity. Both who we are in relationship and as individuals. As Anglicans I believe that we are called to do that in two very public ways, two ways which we must maintain at all costs – they are worship and service. Worship of Almighty God and service to the community around us, service to people who come to this place hoping to encounter a God and a people who are loving and generous. Don't be fooled into thinking that modern gimmicks will bring people into church, whether in preaching, in music or in liturgy. As a church we stand in the tradition of 2000 years of ordered Christian

worship which has evolved and changed and has even been reformed. We worship a God who has entered our humanity and all its experience through the incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ, the Jesus whom we encounter in the intimacy of holy communion. We worship a God whose Spirit brings joy to the Church and empowers the Church in its mission. We worship a God who has created the whole universe and more besides, a God who is beyond our understanding, a God who is beyond our description. A God in whose presence Moses had to veil his face and remove his shoes. It is in the majesty and awe of our church buildings, in the beauty of the spoken and sung word, in the smell and sight of incense and candles, in the dignity of liturgy and music that we seek to reflect, to experience and to convey something of that God. It is a tradition which has at its heart the three fold order of bishop, priest and deacon and the celebration of the Eucharist. It speaks of continuity, of faithfulness to tradition and like the Holy Trinity it speaks of welcome and hospitality. But if all we do is the glorious liturgy and the beautiful music then we are greatly diminishing the revelation of God in the Holy Trinity. The icon says something very true about the function of the church on the ground. We are not here to provide all the answers to theological questions. We are here through worship and in service to be a window, to be an open door into the relationship of three persons who are God and we are here to take up our place at the table. We are Christians insofar as we live in a relationship of love with God and other people

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