

Bible reading: John 16: 12-15

¹² "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. ¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. ¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

Trinity Sunday meditation by Kat Wagner (12 June 2022)

I have been taking an icon painting course recently. I've brought my icon along today to show you – here it is. I chose a fairly typically picture of Mary with the baby Jesus – and we learned how to mix the paint pigments with egg yolk to paint on a block of wood.



If you learn about the history of these icon paintings, you realize that icon painters have used the same painting techniques for hundreds of years, and the images that they paint try to copy and reproduce the original which was painted centuries ago. This is because each element of the icon – the design, the colours, the objects – they each have a symbolic meaning, designed to point us towards God in worship.



Why am I telling you about icon painting? There is a famous icon of the trinity, painted in the 15th century by the Russian painter Andrei Rublev. It's on the front on your bulletin.

Today is Trinity Sunday, when the church takes time to specially reflect on God's nature as three-in-one: as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And this icon, this image, I think can help us to reflect on the trinitarian nature of God.

It is very difficult to describe the Trinity, and it would be impossible to claim that we fully understand it. But over the centuries people have found helpful metaphors and images to describe what the trinity is like. I'm going to talk about three metaphors today: numbers, colours, and dance.

A first metaphor: The Trinity in numbers

In this metaphor we encounter the strange maths conundrum that $1+1+1=1$! Or in other words: The Holy One as three persons.

In this icon you see three angels, who were the three visitors who came to Abraham and Sarah to tell them the news that they would have a son. You can read the story in Genesis 18. In the story, Abraham and Sarah seem to see 'the Holy One' in the

presence of these three. According to the text, they bow before them and call them "my lord".

Many Bible scholars also agree that the angels in this story represent the trinity: God the Father, Son and Spirit.

Let's take a look at these three figures and how they are relating to one another.

The angels sit calmly, eating and drinking and enjoying hospitality between themselves. You may notice that the outer lines of their bodies form a circle, their eyes gazing from one to the other in a continuous loop. The gaze between the Three shows a deep respect between them as they all share from a common cup.

Behind them, and just visible, are landscape markers from the story of Abraham and Sarah: a house, a tree and a mountain.

The angel on the left symbolizes God the Father, who blesses the cup with his hand. Abraham's house above his head represents the will of God.

The angel in the centre represents Jesus Christ, God's Son, who in turn blesses the cup as well and accepts it with a bow as if saying "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will". Above him is the Oak of Mamre, which also represents the tree of life. This reminds us of the centrality of Jesus' death on the wooden cross, and his resurrection which opened the way to eternal life.

The angel on the right symbolizes the Holy Spirit. Above him is the mountain, a symbol of spiritual ascent and descent.

The poses and the inclinations of the Holy Spirit and the Son's heads demonstrate their submission to the Father, yet their placement on the thrones at the same level symbolizes equality.

Let's look at our gospel reading from John 16. In this passage, Jesus is telling his disciples about the Holy Spirit which will come after he ascends to his Father. So here we have the three members of the godhead mentioned: Jesus is talking about his Father and about the Spirit.

Do you notice the language of connection and relationship in the passage? In verse 13 Jesus says, "He (the Spirit) will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears". So here we can see that the Son, the Father and the Spirit are interconnected; they do not operate independently, but together.

We can also see that everything they have is shared among them, and communication is passed along. In verse 14 Jesus says: "it is from me that he (the Spirit) will receive what he will make known to you", and verse 15: "All that belongs to the Father is mine".

Here we have connection, relatedness, sharing, listening and passing on.

It is from this and other passages that Biblical scholars have formed the concept of God as Trinity, three persons in One.

A second metaphor: The Trinity in colour

For some people, it helps to think of difficult concepts using colours. Different colours can represent different emotions, or symbolise different characteristics. It's what we heard in the All-Age story earlier. In religious paintings like this icon, the colours chosen are very symbolic.

Let's take a look now at the colours of the robes worn by the three figures in Rublev's painting. Each of these colours illustrates a facet of the Holy One:

The Father wears gold. Gold represents perfection, fullness, wholeness, the ultimate Source and it speaks of the kingship of God.

The Son wears blue. Blue symbolizes divinity and also creation: the sea and sky. In the icon, Christ holds up two fingers, telling us he has put spirit and matter together within himself. Here is divinity and humanity: the incarnate Christ. The blue of creation is brilliantly undergirded with the red of suffering. This brown-red colour represents earth and Jesus' humanity.

The Spirit wears green. The green colour represents new life. A divine photosynthesis, transforming light into growth.

A third metaphor: The Trinity as a dance

Another way to understand the Trinity is as movement, or a dance.

One group of 4th century Cappadocian Fathers reflected on the connections between Father, Son and Spirit. They eventually decided to use the Greek word *perichoresis* to describe it. You could read lots of complicated theology about this word, but today I'm interested in what may have inspired these early theologians to choose this particular word.

The Cappadocian Fathers were culturally Greek and most probably would have been familiar with traditional Greek dancing involving three people. The dance is called perichoresis, and this is how it goes:

The three dancers move in circles, weaving in and out. They start to go faster and faster and faster, all the while staying in perfect rhythm and in sync with each other. Eventually, they are dancing so quickly that, as you look at them, it just becomes a blur. Their individual identities are part of a larger dance.

We can only guess, but maybe the early church fathers and mothers looked at that dance (the perichoresis) and said, "That's what the Trinity is like."

According to this concept, whatever is going on in God is *a flow, a radical relatedness, a perfect communion* between Three—a circle dance of love. God is not just a dancer; God is the dance itself.

A quick recap

We have seen that Christians over the years have sought to understand God as Trinity, and they have come up with various metaphors, images and ideas to describe the trinity:

- If you like to work with numbers, maybe the concept of three-in-one is useful for you. The Holy One can be described as three persons, as Abraham and Sarah saw the three angelic visitors and bowed down and called them, “My Lord”.
- Or if you prefer colours, you may find it helpful to think about the colours gold, blue and red, and green and what they characterise about the Father, the Son and the Spirit.
- And if you are more of a mover, maybe you would love to think of the Trinity as a circle dance: three dancers endlessly and effortlessly becoming one movement.

But what difference does God as Trinity make for us?

The Trinity has the potential to change our relationships, our culture, our world for the better!

That’s a strong statement, but I believe it could be true.

If we take these metaphors of God seriously, then we must conclude that God is all about relationship, connection, and mutual love.

And if this is the nature of God, it should influence our beliefs and our practice as Christians. Let us seek to build friendships with others; let us listen, find connections and seek after unity; let us love one another as God loves us.

Let’s take one more look at the Trinity icon. Does it seem to you like there is space at the table for one more? Could the Spirit’s hand be pointing to this open space and inviting us to sit and eat and join them in fellowship?

And can you see a little rectangular hole on the front of the table? Apparently the original icon had some glue remaining on this patch, and some art historians believe this indicates that there might have once been a mirror glued to the front of the table. And in the mirror would be the face of the observer. Our face. You!

Isn’t this a wonderful thought: you—and all of creation—are invited to sit at the divine table. As Wm Paul Young, the author of *The Shack*, writes: You are called “to consciously participate in the divine dance of loving and being loved.”

Will you take a seat at the divine table? Will you join in the dance?

I will finish by reading a poem from a gathering of the World Council of Churches:

In mystery and grandeur
we see the face of God.
In earthiness and the ordinary
we know the love of Christ.
In heights and depths
and life and death:
the Spirit of God
is moving among us.

Amen