



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Trinity Sunday

Sunday, June 7, 2020

Scripture Passages: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 & Matthew 28:16-20

+ *In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today is Trinity Sunday. A day that was established in the 9th century by Pope Gregory to speak about the doctrine of the Trinity – the key distinctive for all Christians. It's the only feast-day in the Christian calendar that's dedicated to a doctrine so that's kind of interesting and points to its importance.

It's also known as the curate's graveyard. It's the day on which it's traditional to assign the newly ordained priest and apprentice in the Gospel to preach. It's notoriously difficult to preach on the Trinity and avoid some kind of heresy!

And that speaks to the difficulty of trying to define God. And yet you know, it's also not enough to throw our hands up and simply declare it a holy mystery either.

It's instructive to at least think about what we can know about the Trinity – about our God: not in order to closely or rigidly define God, but perhaps in order to treasure and value the relationship that the doctrine of the Trinity describes. And it's important never more so than today – this week – the week that we have been struggling with the powers and principalities of this world. It's important, so let me give it a bash this morning.

You'll notice that I begin every homily with the words I just said – that "I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit." There are many reasons why I do that and they are all based in the doctrine of the Trinity. It's my intention every time I speak to do so mindful of what it means to speak in the name of the God in whose image I am made. But to speak of doctrine sounds dull – and dry. I mean it's not – its absolutely the opposite: it's incredibly important and it's light and life – but it maybe doesn't sound that way at first.

So let me try and unpack it a bit and then bring it back to us.

I want to show you a picture – it’s an icon actually. I love icons – they are special works of art and devotion – they depict divine reality – reality changed by God. This one is an icon of the Trinity. It was written – because they aren’t painted, they’re said to be “written” around the beginning of the 15th century by Andrei Rublev.

I think it is a very beautiful depiction of the Trinity.

So what you need to know about it is this: First, it’s a depiction of a scene in scripture: the story in Genesis 18 of three angels who visited Abraham by the oaks of Mamre.

This story has been taken by Christians as a fore-shadowing of the revelation that God is three persons sharing one purpose,... there are three angels in the story which represent, we are told, an appearance of ‘the Lord’; because they speak and act as one.

And that’s really interesting as it’s the only example in Scripture of the three in one, the Trinity, appearing in human company all at once, as it were,... I mean, we hear about the other members of the Trinity throughout scripture (as in the Gospel of Matthew) but this seems to be the only story in which humans perceive in human ways that all three are present at once.

And as a result of that, it is the only depiction in the Orthodox church of the Trinity and it was painted many times. Rublev’s interpretation of this scene, painted around 1410, is however, the most iconic. It functions as a kind of summary of all that we know about the Trinity from scripture.

If you look at it, you’ll see three figures seated round a table. It’s important to know that we can’t with certainty distinguish each member of the Trinity. That’s a good thing though because one of the things that it’s inaccurate to do when describing the Holy Trinity is to separate the three persons of the Trinity out – to treat them as individuals with specific jobs – or as I heard someone once put it, the Trinity is not a job creation scheme for God. They are three, but one. A distinction that’s sometimes hard to hold in your head but important to try nonetheless.

Dr. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury has written a beautiful description of this icon and in it he says, “It is good to be reminded forcefully that all that God does, is done by the whole Trinity equally.” And so the God of creation is the very same God of the Incarnation, and is the same God of Pentecost – that the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit are involved in all those events equally. That is one of the reasons we have to be really careful with verbal re-workings or descriptions of the Trinitarian formula. But what is equally important to say is that there is difference within that unity. Blessed diversity. Unique difference. Just hold on to that for a bit. I’ll come back to it.

However, having said that there is a general convention that the icon is “read” from left to right – and so we are probably seeing a representation of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in that order.

I’ve spent lots of time thinking about and praying this icon – it’s very important to me personally. In fact it hangs above the prayer desk in my office and I contemplate it almost every day when I’m there. I could say many things about it but I want to concentrate on two things this morning: the relationship between the persons of the Trinity – and our relationship with the Trinity. And then why this is important at all as we live our lives today.

First, their relationship: You notice how they’re sitting in a circle? You notice how their wings overlap – like it’s a circle of care and loving protection? I think it’s a communication of their intimacy and that it’s a creation of a sacred and intimate space.

Colour is also important. In the original, each of the persons wears some blue, a symbol of God’s eternity; the colour of the rest of their clothing too is significant: gold on the first figure recalls the Father’s glory, purple on the second, representing the royalty and suffering of the Son, and green on the third figure because green is the colour of growth and life and that’s associated with the Holy Spirit.

And then there’s the table around which community (or *koinonia*) takes place – community always takes place round tables, doesn’t it?; I love the thought that our God is a community in itself.

Also, and this is my very favourite bit - as we look at the figures in the icon, you can see that each tilts the head toward each other – they are FOR each other. What’s being conveyed again is the fundamental relationship between the three. There’s an intimacy here that is profound. You can see they are of a mind and of a heart with each other.

So much here – it’s good to have a picture sometimes because sometimes it’s important to convey things visually that perhaps it is difficult to describe verbally. But we can see the truth about the love, the yearning for unity, the care and protection of the Trinity for each other in this icon.

Okay, so I hope you’re still with me because the most important part is coming up next.

I think the most significant thing for me about this icon – the thing that stopped me in my tracks, when I first saw it, and made me take a deep breath, is that this picture is unfinished.

Did you notice? Right in the front – unmistakably in front of our noses as the ones who look at it, is an empty space. An empty space that is an invitation to join the relationship between the three that is so powerfully depicted here.

But there's something more here. Because in the divine reality that the icon shows, we are not in fact looking at the picture. Instead the energy goes the other way – we, in fact, are the ones being observed and more than that – we are being invited by the Trinity because that table is not complete. There is a fourth side to the table and that's where we're invited to pull up a bench and join the feast -- and the relationship that exists between the Trinity.

Maybe we miss that because we are so used to passively looking at pictures? It's interesting though, because interpreters say that's not how this icon works – in fact, it's how any icon works. What's really happening here is that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are looking towards the one who is contemplating the icon. They are looking at us offering us an invitation into the movement of love which exists between them. They are waiting for us to complete the circle.

And this invitation reminds us pretty profoundly that we are created in the image of God, and therefore we were made to be brought into relationship with God. And to be in a loving relationship with God – is similar to being in every other loving relationship - it brings the very best out in us. That's how we know it's love. God comes as a light into our lives, into our mind, into our bodies, and lights up the very best within us.

And this points us to something very important: our relationship with God is a fulfilling relationship. You see we aren't just spectators of this relationship between Father, Son and Spirit – we're caught up in it. We're in the middle of it. God has no wish for us to be mere spectators to be silent onlookers – God wants us to be part of it. This is why God comes near to us in the first place in Jesus – to gather us up in relationship with him – to put us right at the centre. This is the story of God – the God who is always sending, always in motion, always moving out towards the other.

And if we are caught up in this same relationship, it means that God is always sending us out – in constant movement towards the world – in a fluid motion. God is already out there ahead of us in that constant motion towards his people – working at relationships with his world. And God leads us and directs us – Father, and Son and Holy Spirit – to pattern our relationships on the Trinitarian one. God comes close to us. And we are to come close to each other.

And because we have a trinitarian theology, where community and relationship are foundational, we can't believe in a God that is distant, or aloof, or unreachable. All of the expressions of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit are about relationality – all about being in relationship with us, and with the world that God created.

The Trinity is about a God for us, who lived as a blessing for the poor and mourners, confronted the power of evil in human institutions, entered with compassion into the world of human suffering, who broke down the barriers between human sin and God's holiness - and reconciled enemies.

So. There we are.

The Trinity is a community – a community of love. The three in one represents unity in diversity – they are FOR each other. And for me – as I gaze on this icon, it is a daily reminder of the beautiful God I serve as your bishop as I say my prayers for our diocese.

Right. So there's that. But I am sure you're wondering, "how does that marry up with where we are in our world this week?"

Well, we know that each human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Our creation narratives tell us this and this is a good truth for us to hold onto. Every person is made in the image of God. And if we're made in the image of God there's some stuff that then tells us.

You know the difference that exists between each member of the Trinity? Difference and diversity is blessed by the fact that it lives in God's own persons. And yet, it's not simply difference – the three are also one. This means there is a unity in God's diversity. And we can see the longing of one member of the trinity for the other. The love and protection that they offer each other.

That love, protection, for each other and longing for unity lives powerfully in us too – as beloved children of God who have been created in God's image and likeness. And not only that but a longing for a celebration of diversity lives in us too. So we can lift that principle up with Pride.

But the powers and principalities of this world like systemic racism, prejudice – specifically this week anti-black discrimination, homophobia, racist and gender violence and the cruelty that comes from it all, in the pursuit of power – all of that keeps us in thrall to ideas that are rooted in an anti-gospel. Mr. George Floyd's death is a sin because it issued out of this worldview; a worldview that Christians, made in the image of a profoundly loving God must oppose because it runs counter to our baptismal promises to respect the dignity of every human being.

The difference and diversity within humanity is a blessing. So whether that difference is found in race or gender or socio economics or any other way that we humans divide ourselves, we know that "in Christ Jesus [we] are all children of God through faith. As many of [us] as were baptized into Christ have clothed [ourselves] with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of [us] are one in Christ Jesus." [Galatians 3:26-28]

As believers we all find our unity in God.

Our Gospel today is what is called The Great Commission. Jesus commands us to go and make disciples. It's important to understand the Trinity because it forms the foundation of what we're inviting people to: to unity in diversity; to profound and self-giving, sacrificial love; to be in relationship with a God who is FOR us and to a community that gets all that and tries to live into that reality.

That's an invitation and a truly great commission that our world needs desperately. And though we are not perfect, though we don't always operate out of this knowledge – the trying – with the help and guidance and support of the Holy Spirit – remember that Trinity comes after Pentecost – is what God honours. So go and make disciples – and know that God is with us always.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.