

Rublev's Icon: Contemplating the Trinity, Inwardly and Outwardly

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The Hospitality of Abraham.



For many of us, any talk of Trinity brings to mind Andrei Rublev's 15th century icon, painted it is believed, sometime around 1410. Type "Trinitarian icons" into *Google Images* and the predominant image you'll get is this well-known icon.

I have in my library a beautiful copy of it – written by the Benedictines from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem – a gift from one of my sisters. Called by its traditional Eastern name it is known as "The Hospitality of Abraham."

It depicts the three angels who visited Abraham near the great trees of Mamre (Gen 18: 1-15), but has long come to be seen as an icon of the Trinity; although it must be said that it is far from clear that that the intention of the "writer" was to identify each of the three figures as a particular member of the Trinity. Tradition does however suggest that the central, and thus pivotal figure in the icon, is Jesus Christ incarnate."¹

"If it pleases you, stop for a while with your servant [Abraham]. I'll get some water so you can wash your feet. Rest under this tree. I'll get some food to refresh you on your way, since your travels have brought you across my path."

They said, "Certainly. Go ahead."

Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. He said, "Hurry. Get three cups of our best flour; knead it and make bread."

Then Abraham ran to the cattle pen and picked out a nice plump calf and gave it to the servant who lost no time getting it ready. Then he got curds and milk, brought them with the calf that had been roasted, set the meal before the men, and stood there under the tree while they ate."

At its most obvious level this icon depicts three angelic persons gathered around a square, or perhaps a rectangular table. On the table appears to be a chalice of wine, with Christ's hand extended in blessing over it. In the background are the portico of Abraham and Sarah's home, and presumably a creative representation of one of the oaks of Mamre. The spatial sense of the icon is a little difficult to grasp but most interpreters suggests that as we look at the figures in the icon, the eyes of each defer to the other in a circling movement around the table.²

At theological level we can talk of these "three" as God, yet we also understand that "God, [though] three persons...is *one in nature, substance and essence.*"

While at yet another level we can say that to reflect on Rublev's icon is to sit with a continuing awareness that beyond our words and attempts at definition and description, God remains "mystery"³ – a mystery of *being*, relationality and action. Indeed, we are told that the Trinity "is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life."

In what follows, I want to (briefly) reflect on *how* it is that we are invited *into* this mystery of trinitarian relatedness. I want to say a little about the *action* or direction of trinitarian spirituality. And finally, I want to *earth* an engagement with Rublev's Trinity in the ordinary and everyday⁴ by suggesting that mission, or action, is the needful outworking of a contemplative life that takes seriously one's location within the divine relatedness of the Trinity.

Returning to the Centre: *Participating in the Trinity*

"To look at Jesus is not to enter into a simple one-to-one relation. It is right to think of Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour [and] to express that in terms of loving devotion; but we need to be careful that we do not stop there... we must never lose sight of the fact that the thrust, the direction of all Jesus is and does and suffers is *toward* the Father from whom he came... To understand Jesus and to relate rightly to Jesus *is to be with him in his movement toward* the ultimate source of divine life..."⁵ (Italics, mine).

One of the first features to draw your attention in Rublev's icon is its inherent invitation – an empty seat at the table beckons *you*. But, "how"? How is it possible for us to *enter into* this relational mystery – to sit, as it were, at the table? How do we move from talking about God (as Trinity) to a way of relating too and being in relationship with this tri-personal God?

US theologian Kathryn Tanner⁶ offers an evocative response to these questions:

"...*In Christ* the ... human [*is incorporated*] *within the divine* Trinitarian life. By joining us to those relations, Christ gives us the very relations of Father, Son, and Spirit for our own. By becoming incarnate, the second person of the trinity takes [our] humanity ... into [his] own relations with Father and Spirit ... In Christ we are shown what the trinity looks like when it includes the human and what humanity looks like when it is included in the trinity's own movements ... By being taken up into them as the very creatures [we] are, [we] come to share a divine form of existence ...by becoming [incorporated into] it..." (Italics, mine).

Michael Downey⁷ locates this act of "incorporation" in baptism. In fact he argues, rightly I think, that "Trinitarian spirituality is nothing more, or less, than baptismal spirituality. In baptism we are conformed to Christ, anointed by the Spirit, gifted by the Father *to live as* sons and daughters of God." We live within the *circle* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In Jesus *space* is made for us on the 'vacant' side of the table. But more than that, this 'vacant' space at the table serves to remind us that Jesus is God's "self-gift" for whom *we must make increasing space*.

Emerging from the Centre: Contemplation and *the invitation to mission*

"The doctrines of Christ and of the Trinity can seem ... remote and theoretical to most people ... [but] what we seem to forget is that they were designed in order not only to tell us the truth about God *but to make us live that truth. They are invitations...*" (Italics, mine).⁸

“To *know* God is to participate in *his* mission; what he is doing in the Son through the Spirit.”⁹
(Italics, mine).

Episcopalian priest, author and teacher Cynthia Bourgeault has been helpful to me in terms of thinking about the Trinity and the contemplative life; particularly in terms of the way we are carried from contemplation to action. In a wonderful interview on centering prayer and inner awakening she describes the Trinity as being like a “great paddle wheel”.

“... [The Trinity] works by self-giving love. [This] describes a process. The one point, call it the Father, spills [over and] into the other point called the Son; spills [over and] into the other point called the Holy Spirit; spills [over and] into the point called the Father, just like a great paddle wheel. And, what is generated [*out of that* continuous movement] is love made visible... The way that we will always know and be connected to God in this life, at the deepest level, is through this process. And the whole process is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – undivided unity”.

So, in Christ our full humanity is “incorporated into” or immersed within a “circling movement” of love between the persons of the Trinity. “Knowing the Trinity is being involved in this circling movement: drawn by the Son towards the Father, drawn into the Father’s breathing out of the Spirit *so that the Son’s life may be made real in the world.* [This] is where contemplation and action become inseparable.” (Italics, mine).¹⁰

This act of “deflection”¹¹, or to use Bourgeault’s paddle wheel image; this generation of “love made visible”, is an *outward* movement that is always towards the “other”. Self-emptying (*kenosis*) for the love of the other¹². This outward movement, I believe, lies at the heart of a trinitarian understanding of the action of God in God’s creation. To emerge from the contemplative experience, the “centre” if you like, is “*in order* to do compassionate action.”¹³

Again, Kathryn Tanner captures this sense wonderfully when she tells us that:

“...The character of [God’s] mission, as Jesus’ own way of life makes clear, is to inaugurate a life-brimming, spirit-filled community of human beings akin to Jesus in their relations with God: the mission means bringing in the kingdom or new community that accord with Jesus’ own healing, reconciling, and life-giving relations... We are to participate in the Father’s mission for the world, mediating the life-giving Spirit of Christ, through union with him”¹⁴

In Jesus Christ we enter into what Meister Eckhart describes as the “flow of the Trinity into Creation.”¹⁵ The contemplative and the mystical are given expression through our *sentness* (‘*missio*’). To put it another way, the authentic contemplative experience and the *wisdom* that emerges from it, are given flesh in our down-to-earth love of neighbour.¹⁶ We become “contemplatives in action”¹⁷, immersed in the continuous ebb and flow of the inward and the outward.¹⁸

Eucharist – a concluding thought

Rublev’s icon and trinitarian spirituality remind us that contemplation is not an end unto itself. Indeed, I wonder, thinking of my earlier reference to Jesus’ Eucharistic action in the icon, if this doesn’t also serve as a reminder of this point. We are gathered to the table, at the cost of Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice, to be fed. To be fed in order that we, being “filled with” God’s “life and goodness” are strengthened “to do [God’s] work”; and “to be [Christ’s] body *in the world.*” A Trinitarian spirituality holds in tension both an “inward” or gathered dimension, and an “outward” or sent dimension. Both are needful.

I would suggest therefore, in closing, that we could do no better than to turn our attention from Rublev's icon to prayer; prayer that names the both/and realities of our being *gathered into* "holy fellowship", and our being *sent out* on the wind of the Spirit in the service of God's love made visible through us, for the sake of all creation:

"Therefore, everliving God, keep us steadfast in your holy fellowship. And now we offer ourselves, all that we have and are, to serve you faithfully in the world..."

*Send us out in the power of your Spirit, to stand with you in your world."*¹⁹

Notes

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- ¹ Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Jesus*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003, p. 50.
- ² Ibid, p. 57.
- ³ No matter how seriously I take the incarnation and Christology, this always seems to be the case for me.
- ⁴ It doesn't get more ordinary and everyday than the scene depicted in Genesis 18:1-15 and Rublev's iconic representation of that event.
- ⁵ Williams, Ibid, p.54.
- ⁶ In a lecture in Auckland in 2007 titled: *Kingdom Come: The Trinity and Politics*.
- ⁷ Michael Downey, *Trinity and Spirituality in The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press, 2005, p.625. See also Downey's very helpful little book *Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000, especially chapters 4 ("Participation in the mission of Word and Spirit") & 5 ("Living freely from the Gift").
- ⁸ Williams, Ibid. pp. 57-58.
- ⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer. Asbury Seminary 2007 *Theta Phi Lecture: The Stage, the Story, and the Script*.
- ¹⁰ Williams, Ibid, p. 57.
- ¹¹ Rowan Williams, in an essay titled *The Deflection of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure*.
- ¹² C.f. Philippians 2:5-11. "...Kenosis means self-emptying, always with the proviso that one hopes to make more room for God and ones neighbour." James K. Baxter *Jerusalem Daybook*, Wellington: Price Milburn, 1971, p.40. This deeply practical notion of Trinitarian "self-giving love"; the generation of *love made visible*, "puts us", as Greek Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware says, "under an obligation to struggle at every level, from the strictly personal to the highly organized, against all forms of oppression, injustice and exploitation." (*The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, revised edition 1995, p. 39.
- ¹³ Richard Rohr.
- ¹⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Kingdom Come: The Trinity and Politics*.
- ¹⁵ Philip Sheldrake, *Apophatic Spirituality in The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press, 2005, p.118.
- ¹⁶ St. Teresa of Avila.
- ¹⁷ A description often attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola.
- ¹⁸ For me, the "ebb and flow" evokes memories of many walks along Whangamata beach: the ebb and flow of tides; the breaking of waves on the beach and their withdrawal back to the ocean from which they came.
- ¹⁹ Quotes in this closing paragraph are from *Liturgies of the Eucharist in A New Zealand Prayer Book – He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*.

[Word count 1727]