

TALK FOR ALL AGE SERVICE ABOUT RUBLEV ICON

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LINTON

As Cathy has been telling us, one of the special things about Christian faith is that we believe that God is very mysterious, because God is a Trinity – that is, one God and three persons, all at the same time. The Father – that is, the source of everything that exists, the Son – that is Jesus, God’s Son, who existed with his Father throughout all ages before he came into the world at Bethlehem; and the Holy Spirit – that is the powerful love flowing from the Father and the Son, and coming to live in us and bring the Father and Jesus to us – just as the Spirit came to live in the first disciples of Jesus after Jesus had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven - when the Spirit came to them in wind and fire at Pentecost.

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – one God, three persons. Mentioned several times in the New Testament part of the Bible, but remaining a great mystery. How can three be one? How can one be three?

We’ve looked at various ways in which people have tried to explain this with pictures, and what we could almost call diagrams. But of course, our loving, living God isn’t a problem in maths or physics! You can’t contain God in a diagram or a pretzel or a shamrock leaf!

I want to show you another way in which people have tried to get the truth of God’s mystery across – in a picture. *

[Show icon]

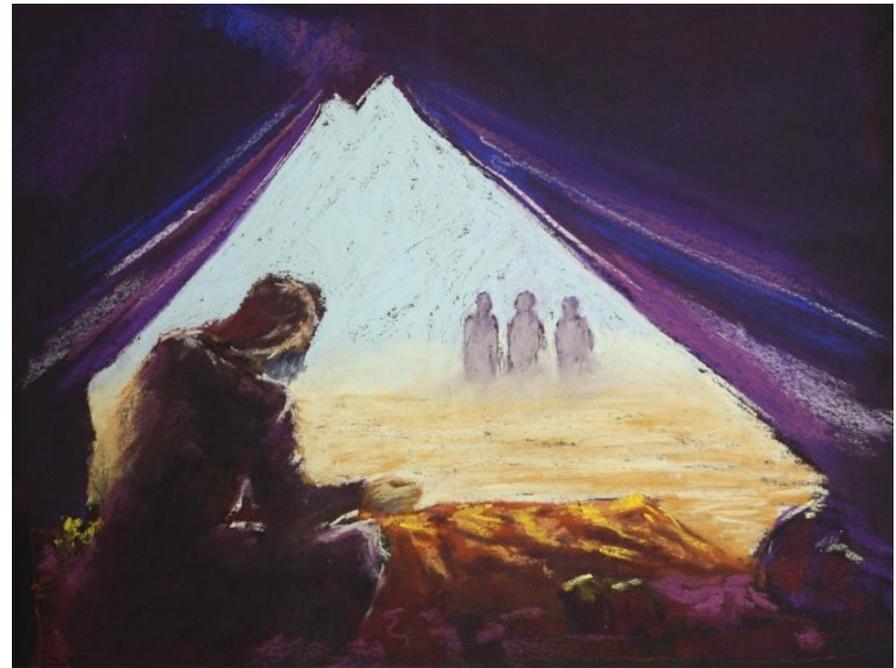
This picture is a very special kind of picture – it’s an icon. Long before computers were even invented, long before, people pressed icons on a screen to get through a ‘window’ to another programme, the Christians of the East – of Russia and Greece, for example - believe that this special kind of picture,



an icon, is a window to a heavenly truth. Icons like this one are painted with a lot of care, and special prayers. They're not supposed to tell us what Jesus, or God, or a saints, actually look, or looked like – but they use very special symbolism so that people in their prayers can look *into* them and *through* them with their hearts, to a spiritual truth about God, or Jesus, or the saints.

This Icon is very old. It was painted in Russia in about 1408, probably by a man called Andrei Rublev. It is an icon of God, the Trinity – but also, at the same time, an icon of a very old story from near the beginning of the Old Testament.

I'll tell you that story very quickly, first – and then we'll go back to thinking about how this icon symbolises God the Trinity.



*In the book of Genesis, chapter 18, the story goes, Abraham and his wife Sarah were travelling through Canaan where God had sent them, and living in a tent, pitched under a tree at a place called Mamre. They had no children although God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many, many children. They were both very old – rather too old to have babies!

One day, they saw three men travelling through the wild, desolate country near their tent. Abraham, was very polite and hospitable: he rushed out, and asked the three travellers to stop and have a meal before they travelled any further. And, so they did. And while they were eating, the men said that Abraham and Sarah would have a son by the same time next year: and Sarah, who was listening from inside the tent heard this, and laughed, because she thought it was impossible – she was too old! But the men said that it was true –and indeed, that’s what happened, within a year. So, baby Isaac was born, and Sarah laughed again – this time for joy.

Now, there’s a very mysterious thing about how this story is told in Genesis 18: sometimes in the story there are three men, but at other times, the three seem to be One – and Abraham addresses the One as ‘Lord’. In other

words, he was talking to God, and God who is three *and* one, was making a promise to him and Sarah.

Nearly two thousand years later, the first Christians read this very old story, and said to themselves ‘even in those Old Testament days, long before Jesus became a human being, people somehow knew that God is both three and one at the same time!’ All the promises and blessings of God come from the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, if we can go back to the icon * – this is an icon of God, the Trinity, but also it is sometimes called the icon of ‘the hospitality of Abraham’, because it shows three visitors sitting at a table under a tree. Of course, it isn’t a *portrait* of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – any more than a pretzel is! After all, it shows the three as separate beings. But in another way, it shows the oneness between them – because the three of them, around the table, make a circle, which is a symbol of perfection and unity.

I’d like very quickly now to point out some of the other symbolism of the icon:

Each figure has part of his clothing in blue – the colour of heaven. God and heaven belong together. There’s also a

lot of gold in the picture – the colour of glory – gold wings, a gold altar, a gold roof on the house in the top left-hand corner. God is a God of glory.

All the figures look alike – they all have young faces. There's no old man with a white beard here! God never ages – he is eternal, and all the persons of the Trinity are alike in love and truth.

On the left is God the Father, source of all that is. We know that he's the Source, because his outer clothes aren't of a single colour – they're made of something like those translucent fabrics we know, which show all the different colours, depending on the light you see them in.

In the centre is God the Son – the Word of God – Jesus Christ. His inner robe is dark, earthy red, like earth – or like blood. He took on earthly life and shed his blood for us. Yet his outer robe is the blue of heaven: he unites heaven and earth in himself. Two natures in one person: Divine and human. And on his shoulder is a band of gold: it shows that all authority is on his shoulder.

On the right sits God, the Holy Spirit, again in heavenly blue, but clad above it in green, the colour of life. He

breathes life into all creation. All living things owe their freshness to his touch.

The Father gestures towards the Son; - or is it towards the cup on the table? The Son points to the Holy Spirit, but perhaps also to the cup; the Spirit points to the Father. They make a perfect circle of love around the table, on which is the cup of sacrifice which the Son took up for us.

Behind each figure is a symbol: The Spirit sits in front of a steep, craggy mountain – the mountain of prayer. Praying faithfully and praying for the right thing is sometimes difficult and feels like climbing a mountain: The Holy Spirit aids us, by praying within us. The mountain points towards a tree, behind the Son: Jesus, the Son, died on the cross, made from a tree, and turned it into the tree of life for us – something that gives us shelter and rest. The tree leans towards a house – the house of the Father, in which Jesus said there are many rooms – space for everyone who would travel there through him. And, do you see? The house has a look-out tower: like the Father in the story of the Son who wandered away to a far country, God is always looking out for us to come home to him, when we've wandered away from him.

But what about the table, and the space at it in the foreground? The table is an altar – a Russian Christian would recognise that, because all their altars have a niche in them, as there is in this one. The altar carries the cup of sacrifice: Jesus died as a sacrifice to win us for God. But there's a space at the table, at the altar, right in front of the viewer. Who is it for?

The wonderful truth is that It's for us – for you and me – for *anyone* who looks through this icon-window into a deeper truth: we're all invited to join the circle of God's love, to be part of his life, in this world and the next. The Holy Trinity is inviting us to be part of what God is doing in this world: Father, Son and Spirit all invite us to live in him, and to allow him to live in us. It's a mind-blowing thought. But even though we can't *understand* that thought, we get the invitation to *experience* its reality as Christian. The invitation to join in the life of the Trinity comes to us when we're baptised – in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – just as Abbi was two weeks ago.