

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 16th June 2019 (Trinity Sunday)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Ps 8

Romans 5:1-5

John 16:12-15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon: Thanks for the mystery!

In many Christian churches around Melbourne, and around Australia, and indeed around the world, priests are taking a collective deep breath in order to steady themselves for the annual task of attempting to explain to their people the inexplicable - to describe the indescribable - that is, the mystery that is the Holy Trinity - three persons in one.

Today is Trinity Sunday. And so it falls to us, along with all our fellow Christians, to grapple with this very Big Idea of our faith, a central tenet of Christian belief, but a very hard concept indeed to get your head around. Our very own St Columba had a jolly good go at the idea of the Holy Trinity in one of the two poems he is credited with, both written in Latin during his time at Iona Abbey. Here is what he wrote (in “Altus Prosator” - High creator):

*High creator, Ancient
of Days, and unbegotten,
who was without origin
at the beginning and foundation,*

*who was and shall be in infinite
ages of ages;
to whom was only begotten
Christ, and the Holy Ghost,
co-eternal in the everlasting
glory of Godhood.*

*We do not propose three gods,
but we speak of one God,
saving faith in three
most glorious Persons.*

Columba's poem captures something of the essence of the mystery of the trinitarian God in whom we believe: the creator God (some say Father, some Mother - but both limited, human attempts to get our heads around the acts of creation that give rise to everything), unbegotten, without beginning or end, infinite; Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, begotten of this infinite, creator God, also co-eternal and everlasting with God, sharing in the glory of "Godhood".

Our human mind, for all its capacity and creativity, struggles with these notions of "creation without beginning or end", "the infinite", "the everlasting", the glory of "Godhood." And yet I find there is a reassurance, a comfort even, in the fact that these concepts are always going to be beyond our understanding. For myself, I find a peace, a place to rest, in the knowledge that these concepts, being inexplicable, beyond human understanding, just have to be taken on faith. What a joy it is, in the midst of life in a secular world that seeks to explain everything in rational terms, to be able to stop trying to understand, and just rest in a mystery that has been given to us.

Another well-known and loved attempt to represent the Trinity is Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity, which was featured at the beginning of our overheads today, and which I had the very good fortune to gaze on in its original form at the New Tretyakov museum in Moscow last year. It is said that at the time of Rublev, in the fifteenth century, the Holy Trinity was the embodiment of spiritual unity, peace,

harmony, mutual love and humility. An icon is not a painting in the sense we normally regard pieces of art, although it is an image that is painted. An icon is a window out of the obvious realities of everyday life into the realm of God. It is said that every paint-stroke used to produce an icon has a meaning hallowed by centuries of prayer. Icons are what we might call religious images that hover between two worlds - the human and the divine, putting into colors and shapes that which cannot be grasped by the intellect, by the human mind.

And so it is that Rublev's icon has such significance, and is said to be the most famous of all Russian icons. The icon depicts the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre (Gen 18:1-8) but the painting is full of symbolism and is interpreted as an icon of the Holy Trinity. The story in Genesis 18, where Abraham receives three visitors as he camps by the oak of Mamre is itself full of mystery. We are told the Lord appeared to Abraham, but he comes in the form of three men. Abraham affords them due hospitality, and serves them a choice meal. As the conversation progresses Abraham seems to be talking straight to God, as if these 'angels' were in some way a metaphor for the three persons of the Trinity.

In Rublev's representation of the scene, the three gold-winged figures are seated around a white table on which a golden, chalice-like bowl contains a roasted lamb. In the background of the picture, a house can be seen at the top left and a tree in the center. Less distinctly, a rocky hill lies in the upper right corner. The composition is a great circle around the table, focusing the attention on the chalice- bowl at the center, which reminds the viewer inescapably of an altar at Communion.

On one level this picture shows three angels seated under Abraham's tree, but on another it is a visual expression of what the Trinity means, what is the nature of God, and how we approach God. Reading the picture from left to right, we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let me share with you how one person has described what we see (<https://d2wldr9tsuu1b.cloudfront.net/17509/documents/2017/8/Trinityicon.pdf>):

Rublev gives each person of the Trinity different clothing. On the right, the Holy Spirit has a garment of the clear blue of the sky, wrapped over with a robe of a fragile green. So the Spirit of creation moves in sky and water, breathes in heaven and earth. All living things owe their freshness to his touch. The Son has the deepest colors; a thick heavy garment of the reddish-brown of earth and a cloak of the blue of heaven. In his person he unites heaven and earth, the two natures are present in him, and over his right shoulder there is a band of gold shot through the earthly garment, as his divinity suffuses and transfigures his earthly being. The Father seems to wear all the colors in a kind of fabric that changes with the light, that seems transparent, that cannot be described or confined in words. And this is how it should be. No one has seen the Father, but the vision of him fills the universe. The Father looks forward, raising his hand in blessing to the Son. It is impossible to tell whether he looks up at the Son or down to the chalice on the table, but his gesture expresses a movement towards the Son. This is my Son, listen to him... The hand of the Son points on, around the circle, to the Spirit. In this simple array we see the movement of life towards us. The Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit. And we complete the circle. The table or altar lies at the centre of the picture. It is at once the place of Abraham's hospitality to the angels, and God's place of hospitality to us. We are invited to complete the circle, to join the dance, to complete the movements of God in the world by our own response. We are invited to come into the depth and intimacy of all that is represented here. Come, journey to the home, prepared for you in the house of your Father. The table is spread, the door is open. Come.

The table is set. The door is open. Come. Trinity Sunday invites us anew, each year, into this great mystery of a tripartite God, three in one - Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. It is a captivating mystery, a mystery that keeps us wondering, marvelling, and grappling. Because that's what mysteries do. This mystery, together with all the mysteries of our Christian faith, is just one of the ways by which God leads us on... in our journey to and with God.

We humans love a mystery - it keeps us engaged, it draws us in. If our faith was all simple and straightforward, I doubt it would have really taken off! But a faith enshrouded in and with sacred mysteries, such as the Holy Trinity? That is something else indeed. God's great mysteries require revelation - and the Bible emphasizes God's gracious willingness to reveal the mystery of God's purposes to God's prophets and through them to others, including us.

We, along with all followers of the Christian faith, are invited through these great mysteries into the realm of God, where those born of the Spirit have their origin and their destiny in the mystery that is God. It is a huge, sacred, divine mystery - a canvas of eternal proportions. Today, Trinity Sunday, let us give our hearts, our spirits, the God-given opportunity to reach beyond the known into the unknowable. Let us see this for what it is, a God-given opportunity to still our minds and open our hearts to that which can never be measured, controlled, or understood. Let us reach out our hands in faith, letting God lead us on into this sacred, heavenly space. Here is the greatest of blessings, at the very heart of our faith. Come!

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