

## Rublev Trinity

Evensong Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James September 12<sup>th</sup> 2021

Keynote Bible passages: Genesis 18.1 – 14, Luke 24. 28 – 36

This icon (on display) was created by the Russian painter Andrei Rublev in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is regarded as one of the highest achievements of Russian art. The original hangs in a Gallery in Moscow.

The sermon this evening is in three sections – first to look at the context, then the detail of the painting and 3rdly its theological significance having been given the name Trinity.

- 1) The icon depicts three angelic beings who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre near Mt Moriah on the outskirts of Jerusalem and recorded in the Book of Genesis. The story begins with the statement ‘the Lord appeared to Abraham’ and he offers hospitality to the three visitors, recognised (by their wings) as angels. By this time in the account Abraham and Sarah are elderly (‘advanced in age’) and have long given up the hope of conceiving. Sarah is in the tent and Abraham requests she make three cakes for the visitors and he gets a calf to cook. The visitors ask Abraham the whereabouts of Sarah – who is in the tent. One then tells her she will give birth to a son, and Sarah laughs inwardly in derision. And the angelic being asks rhetorically, ‘Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? The ‘meeting’ ends with Abraham accompanying the angelic beings on the continuation of their journey.

2) There’s lots to note in the *symbolism of the painting*:

At the top left there’s supposedly Abraham’s house, and to the centre right the oak symbolising the tree of life. On the right towards the top is the mountain (Moriah) symbol of the ascent to the holy. Just as Moses and Jesus climbed mountains for significant spiritual experiences.

There are the three persons, with haloes as well as the wings symbolising angels, God’s messengers. The figures of the angels are arranged so that the lines of their bodies form a full circle. Note their hands reaching in gestures of communication. The blue colour of the robes symbolise divinity, the brown colour as of humanity and the gold of the kingship of God. The green colour represents new life.

The angels are seated round a table on which is centred the cup (which will be shared). Being seated would suggest accepting hospitality. It’s not easy to see but there’s an outline of a calf’s head, symbolising the crucifixion sacrifice. They have bare feet which would relate to the eastern custom of taking ones sandals off when it a home, and also relates to ‘holy ground – Moses experience.

Also note each of the beings hold a staff in their hand, symbolising guidance. We can conclude from this that each has a function of guidance, and they act together.

3) As we come to the *theological significance* it is evident this icon is a brilliant blending of the Trinity and the centrality of the Eucharist, with the shared cup. Scholars of religious art suggest at the time of Rublev the Holy Trinity was the embodiment of spiritual unity, peace, harmony, mutual love, and humility. One may notice the three are quite feminine looking (not having beards symbolic of male). This appearance could be a reminder of 'feminine' aspects of God's nature.

So it was that the three angels who visited Abraham were representative of the Christian Trinity, one God in three persons. The three angelic beings create the circle of the Trinity. The one on the left, purportedly the Father, looks to be blessing the cup. The one in the centre is of Jesus and to note the proximity of the tree symbolises the tree of crucifixion. The one on the right is of Holy Spirit, symbolised by blue and green of new life (remember the phrase of the Creed: 'we believe in the Holy Spirit, giver of life). Also to note if one looks at the two beings on either side they seem to be shaped as a cup, giving further emphasis to the Eucharist. And the table as triangular focussing towards the centre. Some have also suggested the space between the two side angels offers a place for someone to also be able to participate.

This painting then is full of symbolism, though I'm not altogether sure all the symbolism writers have described would have been in Rublev's mind, yet it certainly adds to the significance of the main features. There's lots been written on this and it certainly 'spiritualises' the features in the icon.

4) Some personal comments to conclude.

- Angels, God's messengers have long been celebrated in the church, with the Feast Day of St Michael and All Angels on September 29<sup>th</sup>, in some two weeks time. Encounters with angelic beings occur frequently in the Scripture, the story of the people of God. Notably there's the angel who visited Mary, and Joseph and the shepherds. The gospel records angels coming and ministering to Jesus after the temptations in the wilderness.. There was Peter in prison and an angel appeared and was able to lead him out. Then to Paul on the ship in the storm at sea to reassure that they would be saved and he would get to Rome. There must have been other appearances as the writer to the Hebrews counsels: 'Show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'(13.2) Which reminds me of the testimony of a Christian couple who were joining in a market in Porirua selling Christian trinkets, and literature. A man they'd not seen before came by and praised their witness. Then they saw him no more. I recall a personal spiritual experience at a church down south. Where during the singing of a joyous praise hymn it clearly sounded as though an angelic choir was augmenting the singing of the church choir. Who knows, that may have

been entertaining angels unawares. I remember too reading a book (mostly of testimonies) by evangelist Billy Graham entitled 'Angels'.

- I favour a *Eucharistic focus* of the painting in the way our eyes are drawn to the centre focus of the table. Hence the sentence from St Paul, 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes'. Also the excerpt from the story of the appearing of Jesus on the road to Emmaus and when arriving at the house, breaks bread. Thus there's emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist our tradition and the practice of our faith.
- I appreciate also for those who have personally seen it, like other original paintings on Christian themes they evoke a spiritual experience of the sacredness of the Divine in our very presence and its been very special to share this taonga treasure.