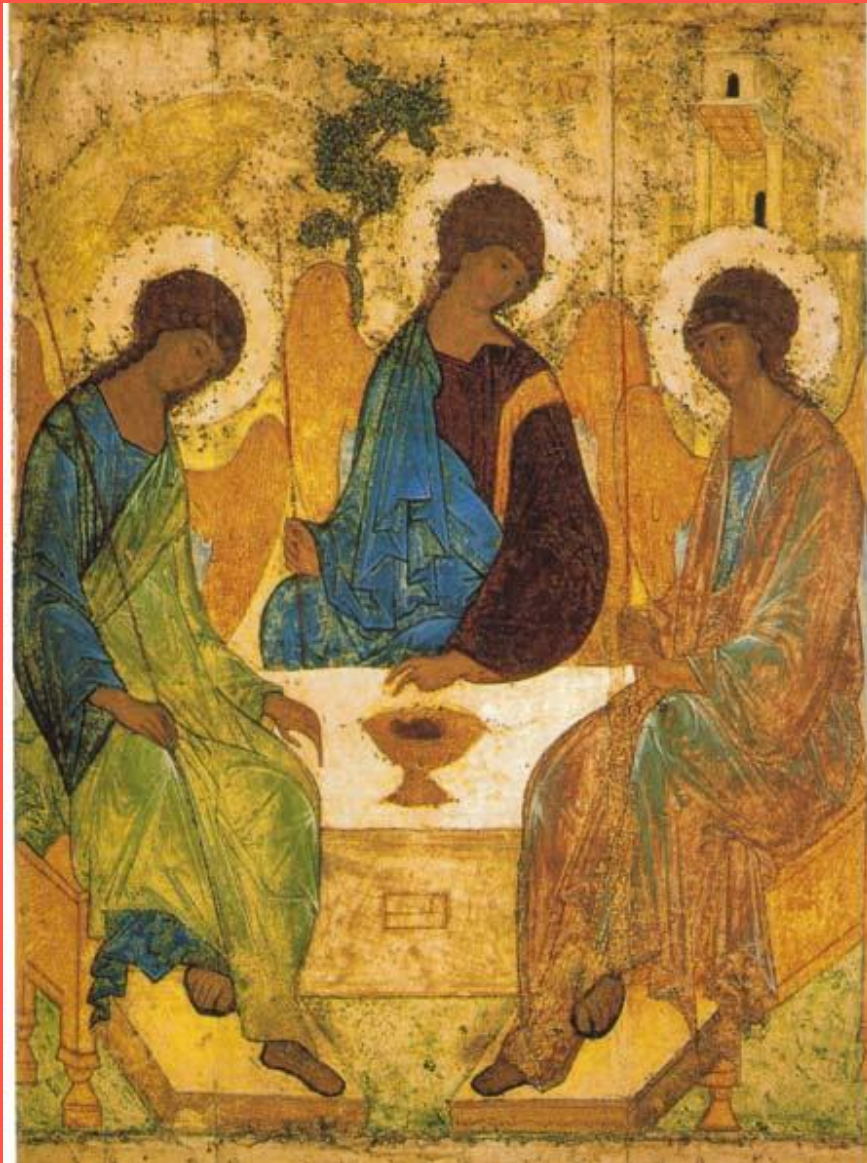




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Exploring Icons



An icon is like a window or a mirror through which we can see more of the heavenly world. The image in the icon is alike a lens which focuses our attention and helps us to think reflectively.

For example, this famous icon by Andrei Rublev shows us three figures seated around a table. Yet these are clearly more than human figures for

they have wings and haloes. We must therefore imagine that these are heavenly beings for they look like angels.

What are they doing there? Why would three angels be seated around a table? The story comes to mind of Abraham in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) who welcomed three strangers into his home and made them a meal. What he did not realize was that the three strangers were heavenly beings representing God himself with Abraham and Abraham's family.

Genesis 18

The Three Visitors

1 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. **2** Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. **4** Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. **5** Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread."

7 Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. **8** He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

9 "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

10 Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Abraham does not at first know that the Lord is with him, but out of the scene of hospitality and courtesy, with service and refreshment, comes astonishing news about Abraham's future. His wife, who has been childless, will have a son. This is a little bit like the announcement of the birth of Jesus, when people like the shepherds, going about their daily business, are suddenly confronted with the heavenly realm all around them, giving them extraordinary good news that will change their lives forever. This reminds us that the extraordinary can sometimes be found in very ordinary events and human occupations, if only we have the space and attention to spare so

that we can recognize it for what it is. The contemplation of icons creates some of this time and space, and makes it possible to see more than paint and a flat two dimensional surface.

There is another aspect to the three heavenly beings sitting round the table. The way the three persons sit suggests that they are connected to each other. Their faces are all very similar and they incline towards one another in a graceful courtesy which suggests that they are at once dynamically interrelated but also paying attention to one another. The scene is peaceful but active.

For this reason, some people have seen in this icon a representation of the Trinity of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God in Christian understanding, and their unity is reflected in the icon by the interrelationship between the three beings.

Looking at the icon in this way changes the way we might want to see the table and the dish upon it. The table can also be an altar and the dish one of the Eucharistic vessels with which the death and resurrection of Christ is commemorated. So the icon has even more to say about Christian belief and witness by taking us into the heart of the mystery of the Trinity and reminding us of what goes on at the Lord's Supper. This God is not one which stays remotely in heaven and only visits us on occasion, but one who has become one of us as Jesus and whose death on the cross and resurrection to eternal life is at the heart of the Christian spiritual journey.

So looking even further into the icon connects us to what happens in churches all over the world every day, every time the Eucharist (Lord's Supper, Mass, Communion) is celebrated. It reminds us that it is not just play-acting or a pretty ritual. God is really present, just as the three heavenly beings are gathered around the table. So the icon tells us that we don't have to wait for some vision of angels to find out what God is doing, but every time we are present at Holy Communion, we are connected to the heavenly world in precisely the way the icon suggests.

The Rev'd Canon Marion Mort included this reflection on the icon in *A Time For Sharing, Collaborative Ministry in Mission*, CHP 1995, which adds further depth to the experience of this icon:

If we attempt to visualize Trinity, we may well imagine a stained glass representation of a cloud-surrounded Father God above an impossibly hovering dove above a crucifix held rigidly vertical in a narrow lancet. The Rublev icon, however, dissolves this hierarchical structure and presents us with an image of unity, harmony and courtesy, in which no-one is dominant, even if the icon protects the sense that the Son and the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father. If we allow this image to influence our prayer, reflection and meditation, we can begin to recognize within it the eternal activity of the Trinity, mutually loving, interdependent, harmonious, indivisible but yet three identifiable persons in one God, each with a distinctive part in terms of the whole of God's self-revelation of his loving purposes towards humanity and the whole created order. As the Proper Preface for Trinity Sunday in the Book of Common Prayer says: '...one God, one Lord; not only one Person but three Persons in one Substance. For that which we believe

of the glory of the Father, the same we believe of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, without any difference or inequality.' It is surely an attractive model.

The persons of the Trinity never act at variance with one another. They work together for the Good. There is no struggle for precedence. It is impossible to withdraw or abstract one member from the Trinity whose Unity is definitive. To try and imagine one without the other two is impossible. The relationship of Father, Son and Spirit and the manner by which we identify them (for example: Life-Giver, Pain-Bearer, Love-maker) is of mutuality and inter-dependence and of abundant, overflowing love. The image of the Rublev Icon offers to us the courteous inclination that listens as well as speaks, that shares silence as well as conversation, that reflects together on the action that has been taken and which will be taken together.

If we then withdraw from the inner space of the icon, we may remember that it is properly called 'The Hospitality of Abraham'. Out of a model of eternal Trinity, we discover a model of human activity. The hospitality of Abraham as he entertained the angels unawares is proffered modestly, but he and Sarah offer of their best. What do we learn here? Through sharing and through offering, the guest becomes the host and gives the gift of life: Sarah will bear a son (Genesis 18:1-10). So at Emmaus, the giver of the word becomes the recipient of the words of invitation. By such invitation, the unrecognized guest becomes the host who is known in the breaking of the bread as the one who brings life and hope (Luke 24-13-35). By sharing, new gifts are known, new possibilities are created. Word and sacrament, high priest and laity are all here.