

# *invitation to the dance*

a sermon preached on

## trinity sunday

11 June 2017

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Exodus 34:1-8; Song of 3YM 29-34; 2 Cor 13: 11-13; Matthew 28: 16-20

Invitations we receive often come with an RSVP. The one today does also. Today, as individuals, and as a community, we are invited to not only contemplate the mystery of the Holy Trinity, but also to enter into full relationship with God the Three in One.

The Holy Trinity is indeed a mystery, not a problem to be solved rationally, or a riddle to be answered, but an opportunity to participate in the mystery of the very life of God which is relational as its core- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- relational, not hierarchical. This is the only way in which we can truly know God in the depths of our being.

After Augustine of Hippo's treatise on the Trinity in the 5<sup>th</sup> century right up to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was left mainly to the mystics rather than to traditional theologians to grapple with the concept of the Trinity; mystical, *accidental* theologians<sup>1</sup> such as Hildegard of Bingen (12<sup>th</sup> C,) or the Cappadocian fathers from the fourth century who said simply "Don't start with the One and try to make it into three, but start with the three, and see that this is the *deepest nature* of the One"<sup>2</sup>

I propose three questions for us, both as individuals, and also as a community of faith.

*What* are we being invited to participate in? *How* will we respond? And what are the *signs* of participation?

What are we being invited to participate in?

Our Gospel reading for today helps us somewhat here: the first disciples are told by the risen Christ to call others into the family of God as they have been called, and to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the first step in that process of disciple formation. The disciples at that stage presumably knew something of that illuminating public scene in Matthew Ch 3<sup>3</sup> at the moment of the baptism of Jesus Himself when there was a proclamation of divine presence with the descending of the Spirit and the voice proclaiming the intimate loving relationship of Father and Son. Baptism draws us all into that same intimate communion with the Divine, into that realm where we can know that we are beloved as a daughter or son of God, indeed that same experience that Jesus had at his baptism. This is pure gift that we are invited to receive and keep on receiving.

So how do we open ourselves to that utterly faithful love of God for us, so that we can experience in the depths of our being the relational life and love of the Trinitarian God? One way is to gaze at the icon we have before us today, both on the front of the liturgy booklet, and also in front of the altar.

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<sup>1</sup> E Dreyer, *Accidental theologians*, (Cincinnati, Franciscan Media, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> R.Rohr, *The divine dance: The trinity and your transformation*, (New Kensington, Whitaker House, 2016) 43

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:16-17

For “Icons offer access through the gate of the visible to the mystery of the invisible” as Alison Asquith says in her helpful booklet on Praying with Icons (available in the narthex).

This icon is the well-known and loved one by Andrei Rublev from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, to be found in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Its traditional Eastern Name is “The hospitality of Abraham” (though probably more correctly it should be called the “Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah” for Sarah is very much involved in cooking for the three visitors!). This is a depiction of the story from Genesis 18 of the three angels visiting Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre to announce that ageing Sarah will have a child. This icon is *also* often called the Old Testament Trinity because it portrays what appear to be three divine agents, an appearance of the Lord, who speak and act as one- thus foreshadowing the mystery of the Trinity<sup>4</sup>. We notice that Abraham does not dare sit down with the angels and enter the holy space round the table- reminiscent of Moses from our Exodus reading, who has to have a conversation with God in the cloud.

When we contemplate the icon we observe a cyclical flow of love in perfect communion. In the centre we have Jesus Christ incarnate (who is dressed in the typical garb of Christ in centuries of Eastern art)<sup>5</sup> whose head inclines to the figure on the left, usually thought of as the Father, towards and into His depths, and then from there, through the Father’s inclined head and breathing out of the Spirit our eyes are drawn to the third figure, the Holy Spirit, whose matching posture calls us back to look at the central figure again, Christ who is the Word from the very beginning. We cannot stop anywhere- our eyes are caught up in a continuous movement, the divine dance of the Trinity, as it has been described<sup>6</sup>. And in this eternal outpouring of divine love there is no hierarchy- true power is contained within a circular relationship of deference and respect, not domination of one by the other: a divine template for our human relationships. And can you see the empty space at the front of the table that faces us? This is where we are invited to enter, as individuals, and as a community – not only to observe with our eyes, but also to participate with our *hearts* in the divine flow of love stemming from the exuberant hospitality of God towards us. Unlike Abraham and Moses, we can now enter this Holy Space in intimate closeness to God because Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, has entered our humanness to show us the way.

#### How will we respond to this invitation?

We have a choice as to whether we enter the gate or space that is open before us - we are not coerced. Like Mary at the Annunciation, we are free to accept or refuse. In a wonderful poem by Denise Levertov titled *The Annunciation*<sup>7</sup>, we are reminded that “The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent”. There was: “A breath unbreathed, Spirit, suspended, waiting.” God patiently waits for our response.

We can turn away. We may say:

*I don't feel worthy, I am afraid of what will be demanded of me.*

*I cannot let go of the past, I want to be sure that I won't have to give up things that I think are precious to me.*

And yes, it is true that there is loss if we are moving into a new way of being, whether that is as individuals or as a parish community. However, loss is an integral part of life from the time we have to give up the breast as an infant, or the dummy or special blanket as a toddler. Even Christopher Robin had to give up Winnie the Pooh as he went off to school- a painful loss for both of them!<sup>8</sup>

Although turning away from the invitation may give relief for a while the risk is that “the gates close, the pathway vanishes” (Levertov). This can lead to stagnation and a loss of vitality, both within ourselves and our community.

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<sup>4</sup> R Williams, *The dwelling of the light*, (Australia, Garratt Publishing, 2003)

<sup>5</sup> R Williams, *The dwelling of the light*, (Australia, Garratt Publishing, 2003)

<sup>6</sup> R Rohr, *The divine dance: The trinity and your transformation*, (New Kensington, Whitaker House, 2016)

<sup>7</sup> D Levertov, *The annunciation*, <https://predmore.blogspot.com.au/2013/04/poem-denise-levertovs-annunciation-full.html>

<sup>8</sup> A A Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*, 1928.

Or, *alternatively* we can consent as Mary did: “courage unparalleled opened her utterly”, thus allowing a new era to begin.

#### What are the signs of participation in the dance of the Trinity?

*Individually*, there is a deep inner experience of knowing one is loved by God; signs of vitality and hopefulness in our lives; an openness to the energising and liberating life of God within and around us as we participate “in the rhythm that sustains the universe”<sup>9</sup> There will be an awareness and openness to the Trinity’s dance in all of creation, so magnificently depicted by Hildegard of Bingen in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (who was finally recognised as a Doctor of the Church by the Vatican in 2012.) She had a strong theology of the Holy Spirit and a sacramental view of the world, seeing and hearing God’s presence in all of creation. In her Antiphon for the Trinity in her Symphonia she wrote:

*To the Trinity be praise!  
God is music, God is life  
That nurtures every creature on its kind  
Our God is the song of the angel throng  
And the splendour of secret ways  
Hid from all humankind,  
But our God is the life of all.*<sup>10</sup>

#### And signs of the dance in the church community?

Rowan Williams suggests that we should think of life in the church as “swimming in an overwhelming current of divine loving activity” where our life, and our nurturing relationships within it, are the “working out of the gift that is given when the Spirit takes us into the heart of Jesus’ prayerful relation to the Father”<sup>11</sup>. *Rhythm, dance, current*, all speak of ceaseless movement within the threefold life of Love that is God. This is the very opposite of stagnation, of stasis, or of looking back as Lot’s wife did with such dire consequences<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, look again at the icon: Christ’s hand hovers over the cup or chalice, pointing to His sacrifice and suffering on the cross that has enabled the invitation to life to be extended to us all. So in a few moments let us join Him at the table in the Eucharist, where we are invited, time and time again, to participate in the purifying fire of God’s love in the company of Christ. And there we can join, as we did earlier in the liturgy, in the doxology of those three young men in the fiery furnace in Babylon, who are kept safe by the divine presence of a fourth figure, the Son of God, who walks with them in the midst of the flames.

*May the sheer grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the overflowing purifying love of God, and the renewing sweetness of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, Amen.*

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<sup>9</sup> R Williams, *Tokens of trust: An introduction to Christian belief*, (Kentucky, Westminster, 2007) 136

<sup>10</sup> As cited in E Dreyer, *Accidental theologians*, (Cincinnati, Franciscan Media, 2014) 32

<sup>11</sup> R Williams, *Tokens of trust: An introduction to Christian belief*, (Kentucky, Westminster, 2007) 137

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 19: 26