The Expanding Circle of God's Hospitality

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Genesis 14.18-20; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 6.51-58

If you were with us last Sunday, you will have been reminded that, though we commonly refer to our place of worship as Bristol Cathedral, our full name is in fact the Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday, the day we celebrated our feast of title and re-engaged in the annual exercise of grappling with the theological conundrum that is the Christian doctrine of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — three, yet one.

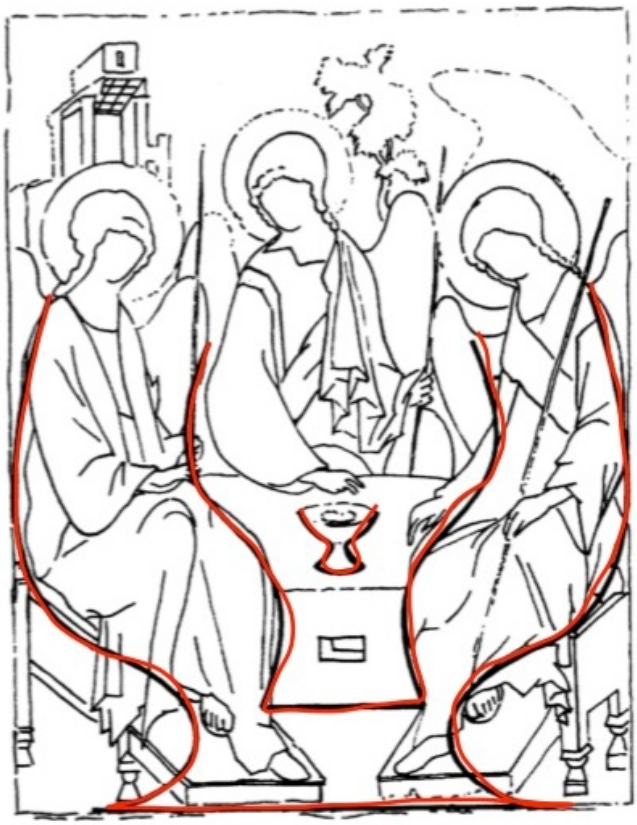
And here we are, four days later, celebrating Corpus Christi, the day of thanksgiving for the institution of Holy Communion, and grappling with yet another theological conundrum: the doctrine that, by partaking of the Eucharist, by sharing bread and wine, we are eating Christ's body and drinking his blood, thereby entering into communion with God and with one another.

If you've been to a talk or listened to a sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity, or done some reading or research on the topic, you are likely to have encountered the famous Trinity icon, a reproduction of which you will find at a prominent place in our Cathedral, on the column opposite the pulpit, on the north side of the crossing.

Written by the Russian medieval iconographer Andrei Rublev, that image has acquired iconic status well beyond the world of Orthodox Christian iconography, as perhaps the most familiar visual representation of the three persons of the Trinity. The icon's deeply captivating composition manages to convey, through deceptively simple visual expression, the beauty, the complexity, and the mystery of what theologians throughout history have spent gallons of ink seeking to articulate in words.

What is perhaps less well known is that Rublev's icon is also a representation of the Eucharist and visually conveys as much about the mystery of Holy

Communion as it does about the Trinity. If you look in your Order of Service, on page ten you will see the outline of the icon's composition, with some lines highlighted in red.



Andrei Rublev, *Hospitality of Abraham* (c.a. 1411-1427)
Chalice shapes in Rublev's icon, identified by Alexander Voloshinov ('The Old Testament Trinity' of Andrey Rublyov: Geometry and Philosophy, *Leonardo*, 32(2), 1999)

The lines are shaped like communion chalices. The larger chalice-shaped outlines appear to radiate from the image of a chalice on the table in the centre of the icon and extend concentrically towards its outer edge.

But why do we need a visual aid to tell us something significant about the Eucharist, considering the rich textual resources that our scripture readings provide us with?

In our first reading, from Genesis, we hear how Melchizedek, the high priest and king of Salem, brought bread and wine to bless Abram. Here, simple material elements, bread and wine, become carriers of transcendent meaning: divine blessing. Just like the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and the water of baptism, they become visible signs of an invisible grace, to use the familiar theological

description of the sacraments. The material elements necessary for our physical sustenance become vehicles of spiritual sustenance.

Then, in our second reading, from St Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, we are reminded that it is our Lord Jesus who, during the Last Supper, shared bread and wine with his disciples and instructed them to continue doing the same in remembrance of him and in anticipation of his coming.

And in our Gospel reading, we hear St John's famous reflection on Jesus as the bread of life, and the promise that, through eating his flesh and drinking his blood, we are nourished by heavenly food, that he may abide in us, and we in him.

These three readings together contain much of the symbolic and narrative material that informs the meaning we commonly attribute to the central ritual of Christian worship: Holy Communion, the Eucharist, or the Mass — whatever your preferred term. It is a sacrament; an act of remembrance of Christ's Last Supper and anticipation of his coming; and a mystery of communion with God and with one another: by eating the flesh of Christ, the bread of life, we become one body, the Body of Christ, the Church.

But what are the implications of this theology for our life as Christ's body (Corpus Christi), in the here and now? What does it mean to live as a Eucharistic community, a community nurtured by the practice of encountering God through the sharing of a meal?

That is where Rublev's icon can help us. Its primary subject is a biblical story of encountering God through hospitality. Though the icon is now commonly known as Rublev's Trinity, its original title is the *Hospitality of Abraham*. The angelic figures in the icon represent the God of the Hebrew Bible in the guise of the mysterious visitors who come to Abraham at Mamre to announce the birth of Isaac (Genesis 18:1-15).

It belongs to a wider group of scriptural narratives that recount people encountering God — or God's angelic messengers, the distinction is often blurred

— through acts of hospitality. We see it in the story of Gideon's calling, from Judges (6:11-24); in Manoah and his wife's encounter with the visitor who announces the birth of Samson (Judges 13:1-21); and in the disciples' meeting with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30-31).

A common feature of these stories is that the true identity of the guest is revealed through the act of hospitality. Gideon and Manoah recognise whom they have encountered only after preparing food for their visitors, and Jesus is revealed to the disciples in the breaking of bread after they have welcomed him with food and lodging for the night. It is these stories that lie behind the exhortation in the Letter to the Hebrews (13:2): 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

Again and again in scripture, God is encountered through hospitality: through welcoming, feeding, and making room. That, I think, is what Andrei Rublev is trying to convey by bringing together the story of Abraham's hospitality and the image of the Eucharist.

Take another look at the image on page ten of your order of service: the vessel in the middle of the table, the dish in which Abraham serves the meal to his visitors, is shaped like a communion chalice. And the side of the table facing the viewer is left open. There is space at that table: a place for you and me to join in the communion.

But the invitation to join in the Eucharistic feast does not stop there. As I noted earlier, the central chalice is surrounded by two further chalice-shaped outlines that extend concentrically towards the edge of the icon. Like the ripples created by a stone cast into water, one can imagine these outlines continuing beyond the boundaries of the image, encompassing the whole of creation in the Eucharistic act. What begins as a cup on a table expands outward without limit. The Eucharist is not simply about what happens inside a church building. It is not even only about those gathered around the altar. The circle keeps widening. It embraces the Church. It embraces our neighbours. It embraces the stranger. It embraces the whole creation.

Rublev’s icon helps us hear today’s Gospel in a fresh way. Jesus says: ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’ (John 6:56). Christ makes his home in us, and we are invited to make our home in Christ. And because Christ makes his home in us, we are called to become people who know how to make room for others.

The Eucharist forms us into a hospitable people: people who welcome, who share, and who recognise Christ in the stranger. The concentric chalices in Rublev’s icon remind us that God’s hospitality is always larger than we imagine. The circle of divine love is always expanding. There is always another place at the table, always another person in whom Christ waits to be encountered.

And so, on this feast of Corpus Christi, we give thanks for the God whom we receive in bread and wine, the God who draws us, and the whole of creation, into eternal communion with the Holy and Undivided Trinity.

Amen.