

Readings for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

18th June 2023

First Reading: Genesis 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to Abraham, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

Second Reading: Romans 5:1-8

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Gospel: St Matthew 9:35-10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to

cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

A Reflection for the third Sunday after Pentecost



The Holy Trinity
Andrei Rublev

It's not often that a religious icon is headline news – indeed, I can't remember a previous time when such a thing has happened. However, you may recall that, two weeks ago, the Russian Orthodox icon, *The Holy Trinity* by Andrei Rublev, was in the news. It is probably the most famous Russian icon and has been widely reproduced so you have probably seen it, even if you don't recognise the name. Written in the 15th century for the Trinity monastery of St Sergius, some 40 miles from Moscow, it is considered to be an ideal example of this type of art.

Unfortunately, the reason it has been in the news is not for its religious significance, or for its qualities as a piece of art. For almost a century, this fragile icon has been kept in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow under carefully controlled conditions. Now, following the orders of Vladimir Putin, in what is widely seen as a political move to do with church support for the war in Ukraine, it has been moved to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

The reason I have been thinking about this icon is because it is based on today's Old Testament reading in which 'The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre... He looked up and saw three men...'

The three men or angels, who came to Abraham and Sarah, shared their hospitality and announced the forthcoming birth of their son, are understood as representing the Trinity. In the icon, the three figures, with the wings of angels, are seated around a table. God the Father is depicted on the left, God the Son in the middle and God the Holy Spirit to the right. The three have identical facial features, demonstrating the unity of the Trinity albeit that each has a particular role, and the clothing of each contains blue, symbolising divinity. On the table is a chalice or bowl, symbolising salvation. They sit as if in contemplation, and yet with a sense of communion with one another, a sense of unity, harmony and peace. The viewer is drawn into the circle, an invisible participant in the space on the near side of table.

Icons are full of symbolism – nothing is there by accident and every detail is carefully thought through. There is a great deal more to be understood in this icon, but I hope I have given you a taste of it. Such icons are often re-

interpreted and, whilst researching this, I came across a new interpretation by Kelly Latimore: *The Visitation of Abraham*.



The Visitation of Abraham
Kelly Latimore

There are many obvious similarities with the original, but also important differences, not least that the figures are portrayed as women. If you look closely at the table, you will see that it has a rainbow cloth, symbolising that all are welcome. And here the bowl contains grapes with a sheaf of wheat alongside it.

For us, they are images of the Eucharist, but they are also understood to represent the work of the kingdom still to be done.

Of that work of the kingdom, Jesus utters a familiar phrase in today's Gospel: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' It can be tempting to think of those labourers as people other than ourselves...

One of the themes that runs throughout Matthew's Gospel is how God's power brings healing, gathers the lost, forgives and restores, and challenges our assumptions about the world. In a world that often demonstrates violence, exploitation and distrust, we are those labourers. We are the witnesses who, like the disciples, are called to carry the good news to the world. Jesus' words are an invitation to join in his ministry.

Jesus demonstrates his trust in God's power to provide what is needed, asking God to send out the labourers, and then commissioning the disciples for their task, giving them the same powers that he has shown. In this instance, they are to go to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel', but it is a mission that, at the end of the Gospel is expanded to 'make disciples of all nations'. And it isn't an elite group he sends; it isn't exceptional people with extraordinary talents. Those twelve include Matthew with his dubious past as a tax collector; Simon the Cananaean or Zealot, a member of a group of rebels; Judas Iscariot, ultimately his betrayer. They are a motley crew, a diverse group of ordinary people.

This should be an encouragement to us as we consider the calling, the mission, that God has for us here, today. For it is always God's mission: the God of mission has a church, and not the other way round. Mission has been well-described as finding out what God is doing and joining in, so our gatherings for worship should empower us to go out into God's world and join that work.

What does that mission entail? Jesus instructed the disciples to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. It is an intimidating list but let's think about it briefly. We may regard most of these things as primarily the responsibility of the medical profession and other experts. Of course, they have an important role to play, but there is so much more to health and wholeness. The friendship and sense of belonging, of being included, valued, loved and wanted, that we can all offer, has so much to do with mental well-being. Providing good quality food for healthy meals and opportunities for recreation for those who struggle to afford or find time for such things aids physical well-being. Making spaces and openings for quiet reflection and for conversation about the things that trouble us, and the questions about life, death and eternity that we all face are vital for spiritual well-being.

This barely scratches the surface; whole libraries have been written on such matters. But I hope that it reminds us that we all have a part to play in showing God's love to those who feel unloved; to meeting the needs of all God's people with the time, the talents and the resources he has given us; to bring healing to the broken-ness of creation; to share and show our trust in God for the future.

As I think around our congregations, I am reminded of, and encouraged by, so many examples of people doing such things already. But it is never a case of job done; we need to be always alert to those new things that God calls us to... and those God calls us to lay aside. And we can only do that in the strength of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Bearing that in mind, I would like to leave you with a short reflection on Rublev's icon of *The Holy Trinity* by the theologian, Henri Nouwen.

'The more we look at this holy image with the eyes of faith, the more we come to realize that it is painted not as a lovely decoration for a church, nor as a helpful explanation of a difficult doctrine, but as a holy place to enter and stay within.

As we place ourselves in front of the icon in prayer, we come to experience a gentle invitation to participate in the intimate conversation that is taking place among the three divine angels and to join them around the table. The movement from the Father toward the Son and the movement of both Son and Spirit toward the Father become a movement in which the one who prays is lifted up and held secure...

We come to see with our inner eyes that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle... the house of perfect love (*Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, p. 20-22).'