

Trinity Sunday 2012

Have you ever wondered what God might be like? Have you ever tried, literally or metaphorically, to draw up your picture of God?

Of course it is, in any final complete sense, a completely pointless exercise. God is infinite. God cannot be tied down by a single image or metaphor, or a cutesy religious phrase. No matter what we might come up with in our description of God, God will always be MORE.

But it's still an interesting task – drawing a picture of God. Because when we try to do so two things happen. First, we identify OUR version of God, which can often tell us a lot about ourselves. But second, we can be encouraged, or even forced, to confront the limitations inherent in our own picture.

God the white-bearded old man – limited.
God the fierce judge – limited.
God the helpless babe in a manger – limited.
God the divine spark of knowledge – limited.
God the Spirit moving over the waters – limited.
Even God the Trinity – limited.

Today is Trinity Sunday. One of the best Trinity Sunday sermons I have heard was an exposition of the well-known icon of the Trinity by Rublev. I'm sure you know it. It shows three figures seated at a table, all looking out at ME.

At ME, the one who is looking at THEM.

The table, in effect, has a spare, open place and I, the worshipper, am being invited to occupy that place; to sit down at table in fellowship with the three persons of God.

There is a lot I could say about this icon; this particular picture of God. But I want this evening to draw your attention only to one aspect of it – the open place at the table.

The thing I like about this picture of the Trinity is that it is not, and does not claim to be, complete. There is a space for something more. And the “something more” is me, or you, or anyone else who chooses to engage with the image of divine fellowship. This is an open God, a God who changes with each different viewer, a God who is always the same, but always different. There is always the possibility of God being MORE.

John's Gospel opens with the phrase: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God". WITH God. The Greek is *προς τον θεον*. The proximity implied by this phrase, *προς τον θεον*, is strong. It is underlined by the subsequent phrase - *και θεος ην ο λογος* (and the Word WAS God). Consubstantial, of one being. They are the same thing. It is this intimacy of being which binds together all three persons of the Trinity seated at the table in Rublev's icon.

But, as I've suggested, Rublev's vision of the divine economy is an open one. Within that ultimate intimacy of being there is a space for me. I too – you too – may be *προς τον θεον* – with God at the table, enriching and expanding the picture of the Godhead.

It's an astonishing idea, but it's not my idea, nor Rublev's idea, nor even purely a New Testament idea. When the prophets, like Isaiah, whose writings gave us our rather extraordinary first reading this morning, were called – or, more accurately when they responded to God's vision – they became the mouthpiece of God. They became the voice of the Spirit in their day. They became not simply *προς τον θεον*, but a very part of God's intervention in the world. God took a new form by harnessing Isaiah's voice and pen, and Ezekiel's, and Jeremiah's, and so on.

Rare indeed are such calls to become the mouthpiece of God. The prophet's call is uncommon and dangerous, albeit ancient. The thing which is, perhaps, new in the Christian Gospel, and which Rublev's icon illustrates so well, is that not only the great prophets, but ANYONE may be called to join in conversation "with God". Anyone may be called to expand our vision of the Godhead.

Anyone.

Moreover, God takes pleasure in the company and in its diversity. The creator does not, of course, need the creature, but God takes pleasure and joy in our presence at the table. Perfection is, in a sense, made more perfect by our saying "yes" to the invitation to be "with God". The possibilities of God become more revealed as each believer engages with the divine.

In this morning's reading from St John's gospel we hear a well-known passage which, for me at least, retains its power despite its familiarity. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Now, apart from being a fabulously trite answer to the question “why did God send Jesus?” this passage might also contribute to an answer for the question with which I began this sermon. “What is God really like?”

God did not send his son into the world as the righteous judge, nor as the Davidic Messiah-king, nor as any of the other expected version of god-likeness. God’s son, Jesus, was unexpected, different, radical, challenging. He attacked the pietists of his day, with their mechanistic view of God. He attacked the moralistic goody-goodies of his day, with their dour view of God. He attacked, in fact, anyone who thought that they had trapped God in the narrow box of their own imagination.

And then he saved them.

ALL of them.

This was a new vision of God. The heavenly worship narrated by Isaiah may seem an exclusive affair, but in the end it is the nobody – the mortal prophet – who is able to say “here am I, send me.” A nobody, the least of the least, may respond to the call. This is the theology that Jesus too teaches.

And if Jesus did all that inviting, and indeed all that saying yes, then the Holy Spirit – at once the comforter and the great disrupter – is even more of an iconoclast for those who would want to make heaven an exclusive place. Is it really such a great surprise that there are so many versions of Christianity abroad when the Spirit which guides the Church is such a radical disrupter of our comfort zones, whilst at the same time showing us new ways to our true home?

No. God does not fit into a box. No matter how wild our dreams and imaginings, our view will always be limited by our finite being. There is no trite answer to “What is God like?” There is always something more. And our picture of God must in some way allow for that. The icon of the Trinity by Rublev is limited, but I find it a helpful starting point. I would encourage each of you to try to construct your own image of God, then to stare at it a while, and then to allow the Spirit to blow it apart. You will probably find that it will re-form as a new and exciting collage; a less complete, less certain, more fractured, more open form of the same picture.

Drawing a picture of God is not pointless. It shows up the limits of our views, and it gives us a good opportunity to change them.