

Selfless self-giving: the Trinity and the nature of marriage

A sermon preached at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 22nd May 2006 (Trinity Sunday) by Revd Dr Mark Butchers on Matthew 28.16-20.

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¹⁶The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

In the 1420s, Andrei Rublev painted what has become one of the most famous of icons (*NB this icon is shown on the Prayer group page of the website: click on Parish groups and then on Prayer group*). It depicts three winged figures seated round a table with what is probably a dish of bread in the centre. In the background is a tree, an oak.

The icon depicts the story in Genesis 18 where Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent by the oak tree at Mamre. Three strangers approach and he invites them to stop and eat. What is strange about the story is that sometimes there seem to be three visitors and sometimes just one. Sometimes Abraham urges them to rest *themselves* in the plural and sometimes he just says *my Lord* in the singular. That is why, when the idea of God as Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit emerged, this story in Genesis was seized upon as an early hint of God as Trinity: three persons yet one God.

So at one level, this icon is a depiction of that story from Genesis 18, mixed in with an allusion to the sentence in Hebrews 13.2: "do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares," (hence the wings on the figures in the icon). But at another level, Rublev is pointing us to the Trinity, and this icon is an attempt to touch the hem of that mystery.

When you look at the icon, notice how Rublev has painted the figures in such a way that you could draw a circle round them. The slope of their shoulders, the angle of their arms and legs, all contribute to that effect. Notice also how each figure is looking at one of the others. Your eye is drawn round the circle, and you become aware that each figure is

intimately connected to the others. Each looks to the next, each points to the next, and somehow you get the impression that each of them is who they are only in relation to the other two.

What Rublev is trying to express is something of the Christian understanding of God as Trinity: a communion of persons whose very essence is selfless self-giving love; each person giving to the others and each receiving from the others, each being who they are not in isolation, but only in and through their relation to the others.

The icon is trying to start from the three-ness of God. So often we start at the other end, with God as one, or God as some underlying substance which then gets subdivided into three. The result I think is a sort of mathematical conjuring trick, which I don't find very helpful.

But if we start from the three-ness of God, that to me is more fruitful and more expressive of the nature of God. Because then the dominant image is of God as a communion of persons who give to and receive from each other; who are so closely bound together by their love for each other that in a way we can't understand, they are one. Diversity in unity, three in one. In other words, starting with the three-ness of God highlights God's nature as mutual love, selflessly self-giving: a true communion and hence a true unity.

Now all this is rather abstract, so I want to root it in something we're much more familiar with. I want to take the example of marriage (not least because we are calling banns today), though I think this could apply to other close relationships as well.

Marriage is sometimes called a sacrament, which comes from the Latin word for mystery. A sacrament is a little glimpse of God on earth. What I want to suggest is that marriage, at its best, is an earthly echo of the mystery of the Trinity. So by looking at what marriage is about, we can actually catch a glimpse of what this strange idea of God as Trinity is about.

I want to point to two things. Firstly, at the heart of marriage is the selfless self-giving of one partner to the other. This is eloquently expressed in the modern marriage service at the giving of the rings. The bride and groom say to each other: "...all that I am I give to

you and all that I have I share with you...” Perhaps that’s not as poetic as the old words “...with all my worldly goods I thee endow...” But the modern words actually say much more: the couple give each other not just all that they have, all their possessions, but much more important, all they are inside, the very essence of themselves: “...all that I am I give to you...”

That phrase to me sums up the self-giving love which marriage is all about. The giving of the whole of ourselves to the other person. Unconditional, selfless, self-giving love. I’m using marriage as my example, but that kind of selfless self-giving exists in many other relationships as well: in families between parent and child, or outside families between friends and partners. And wherever it exists, I want to suggest that that is an echo of the perfect selfless self-giving of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The other way in which marriage or other close relationships reflect the mystery of the Trinity is this. I’ll keep using marriage to illustrate what I mean. When two people get married, it is the joining together of two separate lives into one married life. Thereafter they are bound together, hopefully for life, though we have to recognise with compassion and understanding that not all marriages do last for life, and sometimes it is right where love and self-giving have broken down or become one-sided, that two people should part.

But when two people are in love and get married, they are no longer who they are in isolation; they are who they are in and through their relationship with their partner. They become part of a communion which is two persons in one. That is why it is so appropriate to talk about our partner as “my other half”; and why when one partner dies, it feels as though part of your very self has been torn away from you.

This too, I suggest, is an echo of the Trinity: two marriage partners being who they are only in and through their relationship with the other person; and Father, Son and Holy Spirit being the epitome of perfect relationship, of union and communion, of being who they are only in and through their relationships with each other – and doing that, unlike us, so perfectly, that they are one: three persons, one God.

So what I’m suggesting is that marriage is firstly about selfless self-giving love, and secondly about being who we are not in isolation, but only in and through our

relationship with the other person. And I am suggesting that marriage in a small way models what God the Trinity is all about – and not just marriage, but any close relationship, which has those qualities. Such relationships can help us glimpse something of what it means to talk about God as Trinity: two in one in marriage or other intimate relationships; three in one in God.

But of course both of these ideas are central not just to marriage, but to who we are as human beings. We talk about human beings being made in the image of God. From what I've been pointing to this morning, that means that we are made, shaped, moulded to relate to others, to give ourselves in love to others. We are both most human and most God-like when we do. And it was precisely that selfless self-giving love that Jesus came to live, preach and demonstrate, not least on the cross.

From experience, I think it's also true to say that we find out who we are mostly through our relationships with other people – parents, friends, partners. If we isolate ourselves, we shrivel; if we look constantly inward, we vegetate. By contrast, it's when we look outward by giving to others and receiving from them that we find ourselves, who we are, what our gifts are, what motivates us, what inspires us.

When we do that – in a marriage, but not only in marriages, in other relationships or in our communities or workplaces as well – when we do that, when we look outward and give ourselves outwards, we reflect the life of God the Trinity. We grow into the image of God a little more fully, and we find purpose, direction and ourselves.

Rublev's icon is a stunning visual representation of all this. It is an attempt to say this is what God is like and what God does within himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons, looking outward to the others, giving to the others, receiving from the others, being defined as who they are in relationship with the others...and doing so, so perfectly that they are one, three in one.

But perhaps he is also saying to us that we, made in God's image, are also made to do and be the same: looking to others, selflessly self-giving, becoming who we are not in isolation, but in relation to others. We can't do that perfectly in marriage or in any relationship, but we can do it in a small way, and when we do, we echo on earth the life of the Trinitarian God we proclaim, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.