

Sermon: Trinity Sunday 2015

Introduction

Our brothers and sisters in the Orthodox Church tradition hold a spirituality which embraces the practice and teaching of a life wholly and completely under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We see this reflected in the Pentecost text said at the beginning of the Daily Offices:

Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, everywhere present, filling all things, treasure of blessings and giver of life, come and abide in us, cleanse us from every stain, and, O Good One, save our souls.

This prayer is found in Chapter Ten of a remarkable book entitled *The Rublev Trinity*, written by Father Gabriel Bunge. I wish to acknowledge that every time I have an opportunity to preach on Trinity Sunday, I am riveted to this book and to the icon of the same name that inspires it.

Spiritual treasure

Many of you have heard me refer previously to this famous icon painted by the late 14th, early 15th century saint, Andrei Rublev. Rublev is the greatest medieval Russian painter of icons and frescos. His works conveyed light and peacefulness, reflective of his own spiritual nature. The icon “Trinity,” became Rublev’s greatest masterpiece, created for the Cathedral of St. Trinity, sometime between 1411 and 1427.

It is as if a treasure awaits me yearly. I get to open the drawer of mystery depicted in Rublev’s icon of the “Trinity” and renew my awe of it. Reading selections from Father Bunge’s 2007 imprint has become an annual spiritual event for me. I offer it to you to do likewise, and join me in this spiritual richness.

The complete title of this book is: *The Rublev Trinity; The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*. The English edition is published by St. Vladimir’ Seminary Press in Crestwood, New Jersey. <http://www.svspress.com/rublev-trinity-the-hardcover/>

Scriptural foundation

Rublev’s icon “Trinity” is based upon Genesis 18: 1-8. Allow me to read that passage to underscore the importance of the three, who make themselves present to Abraham and Sarah, the patriarch and matriarch of Judaism, Islam and Christianity:

Genesis 18: 1-8

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 favor 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 curd 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.”

Abraham did not recognize his visitors as divine beings, whereas Rublev captures the divine nature of the visitors through his brush. It was the writer of the letter to the Hebrews who wrote in the beginning of the 13th chapter”

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

“Angels unawares,” indeed. These men, these angels, represent the mystery of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The perfect Trinity revealed to us—to all humanity—through the Holy Spirit and the Christ. Rublev’s gestures of communication among the three reflects the equality of the Holy Trinity. The abiding love about which the Gospeller John write so eloquently, is delicately

perceived by us, by those who gaze at the work of Rublev.

Gospel of John

The Gospel appointed for today is from the third chapter of John. It is a familiar story of an observant Jewish man named Nicodemus who came by night to seek Jesus.

The insight from this Gospel which speaks to the mystery of the Trinity is found in Jesus' declaration to Nicodemus that he—Nicodemus—must “be born from above.” More clearly Jesus says, “...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” In other words, to enter the household—the community—one must embrace the Spirit of God which longs to embrace each and every one of us.

Last week, across the globe, we celebrated the Feast of Pentecost, commemorating the experience of the Advocate, the Paraclete,-- both words meaning the Holy Spirit—entering into the lives of the disciples of Jesus. They were empowered to go out and minister to others and invite them into the community—the household.

On Pentecost we baptized two babies and one adult. They were officially welcomed into the household of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, using the Trinitarian words: I baptized you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! This rite of inclusion is wholly Trinitarian.

I stress this on the Sunday of the Trinity to make clear that as Christians we embrace the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as we follow the example of Jesus. It is not “ok” to ignore the grace and actions of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Some do. Some Christians, in my observations, hyper focus on Christology—on the role and work of Jesus the Christ-- and underplay the incredible power—equal power—of the Spirit. Just look deeply at Rublev's work and let the equality of the three persons of God seep through your bones.

Pneumatology is the theological term for the study of the Holy Spirit. (“Pneuma” is Greek for “breath” and “ology” comes from the Greek “logos” meaning “study of or teaching about”). Take that term home with you today and allow it to challenge you and delight you. The Gospeler John certainly did! His mystical appreciation of God revealed through the Logos, the divine interpretation of God's being in the Prologue to his Gospel, is sufficient evidence that John delved deeply into the mystery of the Triune God in ways that benefit our souls forever.

I believe that Rublev would have been influenced by the mysticism and grace of the writer of John's Gospel. We Christians stand in the same mystical tradition given over to us throughout the ages. In an age which attempts to de-mystify all things, may we revel in the absolute mystery of God's revelation through the Triune God.

Conclusion

I close today by repeating the Orthodox prayer with which we began, to engage us deeply with the power of the Holy Spirit:

Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, everywhere present, filling all things, treasure of blessings and giver of life, come and abide in us, cleanse us from every stain, and, O Good One, save our souls.

Amen.

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