

TRINITY: DON'T PROBE, JUST PRAY

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy told a story about an Orthodox bishop sailing from Archangel to the Solovetski Monastery. The bishop heard from the sailors on his ship that a group of three hermits had lived on a tiny island for many years, for the salvation of their souls. As their ship passed the island, the bishop asked to stop off there to visit the holy hermits.

Arriving on the island, the bishop went to the hut where the three hermits lived. They bowed low to the bishop as he approached. The bishop said:
“I have heard that you godly men live here saving your own souls, and praying for others. I am an unworthy servant of Christ called to keep and teach God’s flock. I wished to see you, servants of God, and to do what I can to teach you also.”

Then the bishop asked how the hermits were serving God. One hermit answered:

“We do not know how to serve God. We only serve and support ourselves.”

Then the bishop asked how the hermits prayed to God. Another hermit answered:

“We pray in this way: Three are Ye, Three are We, have mercy upon us.”

The bishop was not pleased with this reply! He said,

“You have evidently heard something about the Holy Trinity, but you do not know the right way to pray! I will teach you.”

The bishop gave the hermits a theology lesson, explaining all about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then he tried to teach them the Lord’s Prayer as the model prayer for all Christians. The Lord’s Prayer proved difficult for the three old men, for they kept forgetting their lines. The bishop persisted in training them until sundown, when he left them and returned to his ship. The ship sailed away from the island.

Sailing through the night, the bishop was on deck unable to sleep. To his astonishment, he saw a bright light on the sea which was pursuing the ship. As the light grew near to the ship, the bishop and the helmsman could see what it was! Maybe you’ve guessed? It was the three hermits running together on the surface of the water across the sea.

The hermits stopped at the ship and spoke to the astonished bishop. *“We have forgotten the prayer you taught us, servant of God,”* they said, *“Teach us again!”*

The bishop bowed low before the hermits and said humbly, “*Your own prayer will be enough. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners.*”

The hermits turned, and went back across the sea towards their island, and a bright light showed their path until daybreak.

What an embarrassment! The bishop had met the Trinity, and had tried to teach God about God! The expert on God’s revelation failed to recognise God in his encounter with God. He was blinded by his importance as a teaching bishop, who knew all about the Faith!

Trinity Sunday confronts us with the ongoing mystery of God, about whom three stories can be told - a story of God outside and beyond us, a story of God near us, and a story of God inside us. From these three stories spring three stories about ourselves:

First, that we have access to God’s peace.

Second, that we have the hope of glory through suffering and endurance and development of character.

Third, that we have God’s love inside us.

No theologian with fancy words and careful definitions can know more about the mystery of God than a small child marvelling at the wonder of a cloverleaf! The wonder of three-in-one!

Back to Russia, and Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity. The icon represents the Trinity as the image of Abraham entertaining three angels unawares at the Oak of Mamre. The dynamic loving relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit seem to be captured in the interplay between the three Angels. They seem to show deference each to the other. Yet their faces seem very alike, and rather sad in expression.

Why sad? Many theologians, including Archbishop Rowan, have spoken of God's joy and happiness in being God. But maybe the sadness in the Trinitarian icon is to do with us. Jesus said in our Gospel, "*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now.*"

The long story of humankind has not been a happy one, and there is yet more suffering to undergo. God's knowledge of the full story may well be a cause of sadness against a deeper joy. Maybe the icon represents the Trinity praying for us?!

Reflection on God as Trinity should not lead us into complicated issues of theology and philosophy. Instead, we should be led to give thanks, with all that we are, for the salvation God has planned for us - and turn back to God in prayer. For the life of prayer is the very inner life of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Very Reverend Professor Gordon McPhate, Dean of Chester