



The Son of God (who draws us into the worship of heaven)

Take a moment to look carefully at the most famous icon in the world. What do you see? The icon was painted by the Russian artist Andrei Rublev. It depicts a particular moment in the Book of Genesis. Abraham and his wife Sarah are visited by the Lord in the form of three distinct persons (Genesis 18). Abraham and Sarah prepare a meal for their guests under the oaks of Mamre. You can see the oak tree behind the central figure.

From earliest times, the Church has seen the story as a picture of God the Holy Trinity and this is what Rublev has tried to capture in this holy painting: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in communion.

The colours in the painting are significant. The Son in the centre is clothed in blue, the colour of humanity and red, the colour of divinity. The Son wears a stole over his right shoulder to signify he is a deacon, a servant who lays down his life.

The Holy Spirit on the right is clothed in blue, again for humanity but also green for creation to signify the Spirit's work in bringing the world into being. The Father on the left wears a coat of many colours. The Father is the author of the whole of life. The Son and the Spirit look to the Father in adoration and worship.

See how the figures are seated around a table. On the table is a chalice of wine, a sign of the sacrifice of the Son but also a sign of the Eucharist. If you look carefully, it's possible to see the shape of the chalice or of cupped hands in the central space between the figures. The Trinity is a community of love.

COME AND SEE

And take a moment to notice that there is an empty place at the table. You and I are invited to come and eat. We are invited to the feast. We are drawn into the worship of heaven.

The Eucharist is the most amazing gift to the Church. This is the meal in which we meet with Jesus our risen Lord. Christ is the servant who welcomes us. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the Bread of Life who nurtures us and strengthens us life's journey. Jesus is the Vine who lives in us as we live in him and enables our lives to bear fruit.

But through all of this, we need to remember also that in the Eucharist, Jesus the Son of God draws us into the life of the Trinity, into the very worship of heaven.

The Old Testament reminds us in powerful stories about the holiness of God: that we should approach Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth with reverence and awe and that this reverence should be reflected in the way God's people worship.

When God calls Moses from the burning bush in the desert, the first words Moses hears after his name are these: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3.5). How much of that kind of holiness is reflected in our worship? How often do we take off our sandals on holy ground?

In a moment of national crisis, the prophet Isaiah has a powerful vision of God in the temple in Jerusalem. Isaiah's vision engages all the senses and conveys the majesty and otherness and holiness of Almighty God:

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew". (Isaiah 6.1-2)

COME AND SEE

This same song of the Seraphs which Isaiah heard in this moment is echoed in every service of Holy Communion at the most solemn moment of the service as we share in the worship of heaven:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (3).

There is great drama in the temple worship: “The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called and the house filled with smoke” (4).

Isaiah’s vision of the holiness of God makes him aware of his own sinfulness and need of grace: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”.

Isaiah is made clean by grace. A seraph flies to him with a burning coal. Then the prophet hears the Lord speaking to him and asking “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?”. And Isaiah responds: “Here I am, send me!”.

In every Eucharist, we are drawn into the worship of heaven. At the beginning of the service we sing the Gloria, the great hymn of praise to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On Sundays and Holy Days we solemnly declare our faith in one God who is Trinity in the words of the Nicene Creed.

In the great Eucharistic Prayer, the president offers thanks and praise on behalf of all the people. Thanks and praise are offered in the first part of the prayer to the Trinity: to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rehearsing the story of salvation.

“It is indeed our duty and our joy at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise, holy Father, heavenly King, almighty and eternal God, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

COME AND SEE

For he is your living Word, through him you have created all things from the beginning and formed us in your own image.

Through him you have freed us from the slavery of sin, giving him to be born as a woman and to die upon the cross; you raised him from the dead and exalted him to right hand on high.

Through him you have given us your holy and life giving Spirit and made us a people for your own possession” (Prayer A)

So we are drawn into the worship of heaven here on earth. The Sanctus is sung and then in the central part of the prayer the President recalls the institution of Holy Communion and all that Christ’s sacrifice means.

After the words of institution we pray for grace and renewal in this Eucharist and we are reminded that our worship on earth is joined with the worship of heaven:

“Send the Holy Spirit on your people and gather into one in your kingdom all who share this one bread and one cup so that we in the company of all your saints may praise and glorify you for ever, through Jesus Christ our Lord”

Finally all the glory and all the worship is offered back to the Father:

“..by whom and with whom and in whom, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory be yours, Almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen.”
(Prayer B)

There is a present and future dimension to being drawn into the worship of heaven. In the present our prayers are joined to the prayers of the saints and the song of the angels.

The Letter to the Hebrews catches this sense of awe and reverence and being part of something much greater than ourselves as we gather in worship.

COME AND SEE

The writer contrasts the experience of the Israelites at Mount Sinai with the experience of those who are drawn into Christian worship. First the Israelites:

“You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them” (12.18-19)

And now the contrast in Christian worship:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:22-24).

We should worship in the present, then, with awe, says Hebrews (12.28), for our God is a consuming fire. But we should also know that our worship in the present looks forward as well as backwards. We remember but we also anticipate what is to come.

The meal in which we share is a foretaste of God’s banquet in heaven, the meal to which we are all invited, the great celebration which will mark the renewal of the heavens and the earth.

Jesus parables look forward to this great banquet as does Jesus own great love of parties. Even at the Last Supper Jesus looks forward to the moment when he will eat and drink again in the kingdom of God (Luke 22.16).

This is why all Christian worship is marked by deep joy and celebration even though we are worshipping in a world marked by suffering and pain, crisis and injustice. We are anticipating the time when all will be set right, when Christ will return, when we will sit and eat with him in heaven:

COME AND SEE

“Send your Spirit on us now that by these gifts we may feed on Christ with opened eyes and hearts on fire. May we and all who share this food offer ourselves to live for you and be welcomed at your feast in heaven where all creation worships you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Prayer D).

In every service of Holy Communion, the congregation then pray together the Lord’s Prayer, after the great prayer of thanksgiving but before we come to receive the bread and the wine. Many of the themes we have explored are echoed in the prayer. Together as the family of God we come to God as Our Father. We remember God’s holiness and our need for reverence as we pray: Hallowed be your name.

We look to the future together in hope and cry out with longing for the world to be changed: Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We look to God for the provision of all that we need, physically and spiritually: Give us this day our daily bread.

We acknowledge our sin and seek God’s forgiveness and we commit ourselves to continuing to forgive others: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

We pray for God’s protection on the journey: Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

And finally we acknowledge God’s power and sovereignty and glory in heaven and on earth: For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

Together we are drawn into the fellowship of God the Trinity. Together we are forgiven and fed. Together we rest in the vine. But then, but then, Christ who calls us will also send us out. That will be our theme next time. Come and see.