

**Living the Trinitarian Life:
not just talking about it, or theorizing about it**

Long ago, Richard Rohr mentions St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), named a Doctor of the Church in 2012, who communicated **creation spirituality** through music, art, poetry, medicine, gardening, and reflections on nature. She notes in her famous book, *Scivias*:

You understand so little of what is around you because you do not use what is within you.

nature was a mirror for the soul and for God. This mirroring changes how we see and experience reality.

In March and June of 1941 a Dutch cultural Jew, another mystic, wrote this in her exercise book:

The inner world is as real as the outer world: it has its contours, possibilities, its boundless regions. You must not neglect one at the expense of the other... One must keep in touch with the real world and know one's place in it; it is wrong to live with the eternal truths [alone] for then one is apt to behave like an ostrich. To live fully outwardly and inwardly, not to ignore *external reality* for the sake of the inner life, or the reverse—that's quite a task.

When human beings confront the idea of the Trinity they have difficulties. A person of Jewish and Islamic persuasion would think this was close to if not blasphemy—as God can only be ONE. A Hindu would be more comfortable perhaps, thinking this was a God very much like the many manifestations of the one God in their faith. The ancient Greeks would have been intrigued that there were only three gods and that the Christian 'gods' were actually reasonable, and not capricious like their 'gods' with their unpredictability and emotional instability. An atheistic rationalist, of course, would, in the first place, think the idea of a God so

much nonsense, and in the second place would consider three persons in the guise of one god, sheer folly. Yet Christians declare their faith in such a God from week to week in the Apostle's and the Nicene creeds, and in this morning's Gospel reading. Are we being irrational, are we infidels and blasphemers when we do so?

Far from it.

In fact, we're living *in* the Trinity. It's part of the material outer world. It's part of that inner world of which Hildegard (1098-1179) and Etty Hillesum (1941-1943) speak as with one voice.

What *does* experiencing, living the Trinity, *Father, Son* and *Holy Spirit*, mean to us today, everyday... into the larger horizon, of 'forever time', infinity?

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams' explanation of the Rublev Trinity icon, which Dean Susanna spoke about last year, draws attention to the following pointers (I paraphrase):

- (1) Firstly, the Trinity is not remote, theoretical, just an interesting concept to play around with in the mind
- (2) Secondly, it's never an object, or a trio of objects which we look at from a distance
- (3) Thirdly, there's nothing safe about it either
- (4) And, finally, the Trinity is not a truth *about* God, but a Reality which invites us this morning to live that truth

So what does that invitation mean? If not, to change, to change direction in our thinking and in our behaving, —in the vastness of it all—to trust God, to walk with God in Jesus Christ.

Like the Kingdom of God, *the Reality of God*, is not something that we just look at. Rather, it is a Reality to be lived.

In the Rubilev icon, with the three sitting around the Altar and the cup filled with wine there is an empty place at the table for us.

Not just God, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, but the whole of creation invite us to share that table. But it is not without cost: the sacrifice and the suffering, the acceptance of a cup that could so easily pass us by.

For you see, our 'yes' to this welcome, commits us to as Williams says, 'the self-giving economy of God the Trinity... and so, the sharing of the cross, and in *that*, this alone...is our life.'

In effect, the invitation, excitingly (even more than the exhilaration of gazing at the stars and the vastness of our universe) calls us on an unending adventure into the circling motion of the divine love, where every traveler will recognize the Saviour's face in the other, and will come to know themselves as they are known.

I really hope we feel like Nicodemus this morning: bewildered, disoriented utterly mystified, perhaps just a little terrified.

Because that's how we're meant to feel, like Peter James and John on the Mountain of Transfiguration, another icon that Williams speaks about, where the true reality of Jesus shines through, **and time and place bend** and we see into another Reality from that which we live from day to day: the past merging with the present: Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus as if they'd never died.

In the *Transfiguration* icon, the disciples are ‘sprawled in disorder’ often looking as if ‘they have been thrown down from the higher slopes—Peter on the left raising one hand to cover his face, John in the middle crouching on his knees with a hand to his face, James flat on his back, slipping down on his face. **The sheer energy of that Reality**, throws them off their feet, as it did Nicodemus when the veil was lifted that memorable night and Jesus and he had that conversation.

Their discussion highlights what this experience of confusion must feel like. And Jesus helps by using the analogy of conception, the waiting, and another, a new birth:

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’

What is Jesus saying exactly? Nothing had prepared Nicodemus for this. After all, he’d just dropped Jesus a compliment:

‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’

To which Jesus ignoring the compliment, drops this bombshell:

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.’

The analogy might only be an analogy, but it is graphic and true nevertheless. Let me paraphrase:

Nikolai, Nicodemus, all of us here. Think of it this way. Your world, your reality has a used by date on it. It’s as if you were in your mother’s womb. You’d be thinking: this is it. This is the world. But it’s not, finally the world. Because this world, and all the other worlds, this universe is coming to an

end to give way to another. Every now and again you catch sight of it, like a light in the distance towards which you are travelling. Don't be afraid.

On the other side, there is so much love and attention waiting for you: you're surround by that love right now, living and breathing it without knowing it. For God so loves the world... he constantly gives his only Son, so that everyone who believes in that Son can't perish because it's a quality of life that is quite different from this one, the waters you're living in. For you see, God my Father did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world. Rather he sent the Son but in order that the cosmos might be saved. Don't be frightened, don't be alarmed. The breaking down that you see around you, in your body even, isn't the final word.

PAUSE

I think when we gaze into the vastness of it all we are inclined to think, like Nicodemus, Peter James and John before us, that this is overwhelming, too much, too confusing. When we feel that way, let's be reminded of **the perspective of the icon.**

It's quite different from any other picture. Indeed, the lines of perspective are reversed so that they converge on your eye... *not* on a vanishing point in the distance.

The whole creation, all those who have gone before (that great cloud of witnesses), are looking at you and me with such love.

No wonder the last thing that Etty Hillesum ever wrote on a card which she threw out of the train heading for Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp she was able to say: ‘We left the camp singing’.

As we conclude our reflection this morning, let us listen to her prayer to God written on the 25th of November, 1941:

God, take me by your hand. I shall follow you...and not resist too much. I shall evade none of the tempest life has in store for me...and then grant me a short respite...I shall accept all the evitable tumult and struggle and delight in warmth and security...I shall not rebel if I have to suffer cold, should you so decree. I shall follow wherever your hand leads me, and shall try not to be afraid. I shall try to spread some of the genuine love for others wherever I go...I don't want to be anything special, I only want to be true to that in me, which seeks to fulfill its promise. I long for the seclusion of a monastery, but I know I must seek you in the world.

And we might respond to that prayer in the words of the wonderful Jesuit priest and poet following the theologian Duns Scotus and his ‘thisness’ of things, caused him not to destroy his poetry so we can enjoy it this morning and realise how precious we are to God:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same;
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying what I do is me: for that I came.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

