

AN IMAGE OF THE TRINITY

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Our discussions of collaborative ministry in mission began with reference to the Trinity. In reflection on what has been said by my fellow-contributors on collaborative ministry in mission, we may seek to move from an abstract idea of the Trinity, to an image: the Rublev Icon.

If we attempt to visualise Trinity, we may well imagine a stained glass representation of a cloud-surrounded Father God above an impossibly hovering dove above a crucifix held rigidly vertical in a narrow lancet. The Rublev Icon, however, dissolves this hierarchical structure and presents us with an image of unity, harmony and courtesy, in which no-one is dominant, even if the icon protects the sense that the Son and the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father. If we allow this image to influence our prayer, reflection and mediation, we can begin to recognise within it the eternal activity of the Trinity, mutually loving, interdependent, harmonious, indivisible but yet three identifiable persons in one God, each with a distinctive part in terms of the whole of God's self-revelation of his loving purposes towards humanity and the whole of God's self-revelation of his loving purposes towards humanity and the whole created order. As the Proper Preface for

Trinity Sunday in the Book of Common Prayer Communion Service says: "...one God, one Lord; not one only Person, but three Persons in one Substance. For that which we believe of the glory of the Father, the same we believe of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, without any difference or inequality". It is surely an attractive model.

If collaboration in mission has to do with labouring together on a common task and if ministry is about service offered not only to the community, but also to one another and to the world then there is some encouragement to look to the life and activity of the Trinity in so far as we can discern or imagine it as offering some significant pattern or model by which we may be guided.

The persons of the Trinity never act at variance with one another. They work together for the Good. There is no struggle for precedence. It is impossible to withdraw or abstract one member from the Trinity whose Unity is definitive. To try and imagine one without the other two is impossible. The relationship of Father, Son and Spirit and the manner by which we identify them (for example: Life-giver, Pain-bearer, Love-maker) is of mutuality and inter-dependence and of abundant, overflowing love. The image of the Rublev Icon offers us the courteous inclination and attentiveness of the three figures to one another. This a company that listens as well as speaks, that shares silence as well as conversation, that reflects together on the action that has been taken and which will be taken together.

If we then withdraw from the inner space of the icon, we may remember that it is properly called "The Hospitality of Abraham". Out of a model of eternal Trinity, we discover a model of human activity. The hospitality of Abraham as he entertained the angels unawares is proffered modestly, but he and Sarah offer of their best. What do we learn here? Through sharing and through offering, the guest becomes the host and gives the gift of life: Sarah will bear a son (Genesis 18:1-10). So at Emmaus, the giver of the Word becomes the recipient of the words of the invitation. But such invitation, the unrecognised guest becomes the host who is known in the breaking of the bread as the one who brings life and hope (Luke 24: 13-35). By sharing, new gifts are known, new possibilities are created. Word and sacrament, high priest and laity are all here.

We are invited to share in Christ's ministry of reconciliation. Our ministry, then, is shared from the beginning. But that in which we share is one, a totality. We may then understand there is no question of there being a ministry that is broken up into bits wherein the bits have no reference to one another: "I only do this and you only do that". Nor is such a ministry delegated: You may do this or that, but I reserve the authority to myself".

We can understand this better by reference back to the distinctiveness of the persons of the Trinity, who are yet not rigidly delineated by their function or activity. For example, we are used to designating the Father as Creator, the Son as Redeemer and the Spirit as Comforter and Sustainer. But we see the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters at the Creation, while both John 1 and Colossians speak in swirling terms of Christ not only as the firstborn of all creation but active in it. "All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). In the first letter of John Jesus Christ the Son of God is described as "An advocate [Parakleton] with the Father" (1 John 2:1), but in John's Gospel it is Christ who says "I will pray the Father

and he will send you another Advocate” (John 14: 16). We may also remember that the Orthodox do not celebrate Trinity Sunday separately, but at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is often seen as the agent of renewal and is invoked for the renewal of the whole creation and for the renewal of the Church. We may assume then, as we are made in God’s image, that our individual natures do not preclude us from any kind of ministry within any part of our common mission. Rather it is our individual choices, understandings and sense of vocation, which leads us to particular opportunities for ministry in mission.

How then do we discern what these choices, understanding and vocation might be? In scripture, prayer precedes ministry. Jesus looks up to heaven, he prays, he gives thanks, he heals, before he feeds, before he raises the dead. So all ministry and all collaborative ministry for mission, must surely be grounded in prayer. We must be open to God and to movement of the Spirit in order to discern our distinctive contribution to that which is both whole and His.

So in Acts, the Apostles pray before appointing, before sending, before deciding. The choosing of those for the ministry of distribution, humdrum though that service may appear, is itself dependant on discernment, praying and commissioning. The deacons collaborate with the Apostles and with the whole Household of Faith in order that the Apostles should have time to teach, and so that the hungry are fed (Acts 6: 1-7). In this way the life of the Church is sustained in all its aspects. It is surely significant that the Apostles invite the people who have identified the need, to choose the deacons from among themselves, indicating that they should be of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Even though the practical side of their ministry is waiting at table, it is recognised as important, - and the Apostles pray and lay hands on them just as they did when send out missionaries. Significantly, the verse that follows the story of their commissioning reads: “And the word of God increased and the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many priests were obedient to the faith”. What does this tell us first about the relationship between mission and pastoral care? Second, what does this tell us about the nature of obedience: that it is not subservience, or submission to dominance but acting in a profound understanding of the common task for the greater good. There is a missiological understanding of obedience which is profoundly significant for the practice of collaborative ministry:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God
who inspires them in everyone. To each is given the same God
who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the
manifestation of the Spirit for the common Good. (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7)

Ministry, whether from the Lord’s table or ours, is significant, because it is a sign, a sacrament, an icon of the outpoured love of God for all creation.

If the quality of collaboration is to reflect the relationships we perceive within the Trinity and if it is to be true to the model that Paul offers us in 1 Corinthians, then it must be collaborative in its conception as well as in its life. “ Let us pray” followed by lets us...together” is the way forward, rather than “I have decided...will you...?”.