

Homily for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity 7th June 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

A favourite sight of mine driving on the A4 into London is the Russian Orthodox cathedral which you can see on the left just beyond the Chiswick roundabout. It is a tall narrow building topped with the characteristic onion-shaped dome, bright blue in colour, sparkling with silvery stars and surmounted by a gold cross. Amid the drabness of roads and traffic it is an uplifting vision. Inside the cathedral there are many icons, the religious images dear to the Orthodox which often appeal also to Western Christians.

I like this story of a priest who wanted to mark an anniversary of his parish by commissioning an icon from an Orthodox monastery. He gave directions of what he wanted and awaited the results. As time went by and the date of the anniversary was approaching he realised that he had heard nothing about the icon for a long while, so telephoned the monastery. "It is ready, we have been waiting for you to collect it," said the voice of a monk on the other end. The priest replied, "I don't have time to do that now, could you just pop it in the post?" There was a pained silence, then the voice said with some emphasis, "An icon is a sacred object, we would never *pop it in the post!*" "Would do you suggest then, time is short?" the priest asked. "I will send Sister Thecla with it," was the reply. Meaning to be friendly and helpful the priest said, "Oh thank you, Sister must stay for lunch when she comes." Another pained silence, then, emphatically again, "Sister Thecla will be *fasting* when she brings the icon!" The next day the priest opened his door to a caller, and there was Sister Thecla with the icon carefully wrapped. She bowed, presented it to him and departed without saying a word.

It is obviously right and good that we should have a sense of reverence in face of the sacred and divine, and different people and traditions will express that in different ways. In comparison with ourselves, our human weakness and failings, the holiness and goodness of God will be all too apparent and naturally evoke our reverence. We cannot presume on God's gift to us of himself, his love and care, but once we know it is a gift freely given we will know that our response can only be one of grateful acceptance and we will want to show that by our reverence and in other ways.

Some of our prayers in the Mass talk about earning or deserving God's rewards by living well and keeping ourselves holy, but I find this attitude misleading. There is literally nothing we can ever do to earn God's love for us, we are never worthy of it or deserve it, and we do not need to. As someone once put it, God loves you not because you are good but because *God* is good. The more we think we need to earn God's love the more likely we are to become closed in on ourselves and our efforts, and the less open to receiving it. We become like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who cannot rejoice at his brother's homecoming because he is resentful at not being treated in the same way. That at least is what he thinks, but the father has to remind him, 'All I have is yours.' If the father chooses to be generous to others that does not mean we will be missing anything. Where love is divine, there is plenty of it to go round for everyone.

This is why we need to be careful, I think, over how we express our reverence. It can so easily become abstract, directed towards objects or forms, rituals and beliefs, where God is certainly present, but then we lose sight of the need to show reverence towards God's presence above all in people. The Gospel reading for this Trinity Sunday reminds us that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life* – one of the most important messages in the whole of Scripture. God is not separate and enclosed in a sacred building or object, but makes himself totally available in our human make-up, with everything that means, because he wants all people to know his life in them and live that life to the full, deeply and richly. The more we can know this to be true of others – in their sometimes infuriating human messiness – the less concerned with ourselves and our efforts we will be and the more aware of God's presence in all things, the more real and true our sense of reverence. It is not that we need make no effort at all, but realise that our efforts will be effective and fruitful to the extent that we know it is God working in us and ourselves co-operating with God.

For many people today it is an icon that has become a favourite image of the Trinity, the painting by Andrei Rublev whose real title is *The Hospitality of Abraham*. You can read the story in chapter 18 of the book of Genesis. Abraham welcomes three visitors and receives them into his tent by the oasis of Mamre. The way the account is written strongly suggests that the three are emissaries of God and in fact the Lord himself, so everyone sees the icon as a picture of the Trinity. The three graceful figures, whose faces are alike and are similarly clad, but with subtle distinctions of colour, are seated

around a table suggestive of the altar of the Eucharist, united in their attentive love of each other. They form a circle, but it is not a closed circle, for at the front of the picture there is an empty space where the viewer is invited to sit at the table and feast on the Lord's goodness.

The church in Westminster is making plans to resume the celebration of Mass in public so that we can receive the sacraments again. This will clearly be a welcome advance. I hope, however, that through this time of lockdown we may have come to see the importance of the Eucharist not so much as an end in itself but as a focus of the many ways in which God feeds us, the many ways he makes his presence known - and pre-eminently in the way people deal with each other. One of the saddest aspects of this time has been the many deaths of front-line health workers, doctors and nurses, who have contracted the virus and died from it while selflessly giving care to others who are suffering. Theirs is surely a moving example of truly Christ-like sacrificial love, which we should honour - a reminder of how costly and precious is divine love and how it is shown above all in the giving and receiving of love among people.

With all best wishes and prayers, Fr. Robin

Fr Robin is happy to receive any comments or questions you may have. He can be contacted at robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk

Note The Rublev icon referred to by Fr Robin in his homily is shown below.

RUBLEV ICON



