

LESSONS FROM AN ICON

What has an icon painted by a Russian monk six hundred years ago got to do with the coronavirus pandemic plaguing the nations of the world in 2020? The icon is of the Holy Trinity and at its simplest shows the three persons of the Trinity presented as angels seated around a table. For six hundred years this icon has spoken to all who view it of the oneness of God with all three figures in perfect harmony with one another. It is a picture of the essential unity of God and it is at the same time a picture of the perfect communion that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit with no sense of hierarchy. It is a picture that is at first strange to Western eyes with all sorts of symbolism (for example the colours used for the figures –blue for divinity, red for humanity) and nuanced language (referring back to scriptural stories such as Abraham entertaining angels under the tree of Mamre) proclaiming its theological message.



But has it anything to say to us in the coronavirus emergency that faces us today?

As we look into this icon we see that the three figures round the table form a circle running from the top of the central figure (Jesus) through the two figures on either side (the Father on the left –the Holy Spirit on the right) to the feet that almost meet at the base of the table - this circle powerfully links the figures together. But although the unity of the Three is thus stated, it remains true that there is space between the three – none of the three actually touches another. There is a divine social distancing that separates the Three and thus gives them their divine individuality so that we

are presented with three persons –distinct but different, apart but together! Maybe this understanding of the icon reminds us that it is in our separateness from others that we find our true identity as individuals. Social distancing gives us the gift of space around us. Social distancing in fact helps us to discover who we are as individuals, defined by what we are rather than by the people around us.

In the icon the central figure and the figure on the right both incline their heads towards the third figure who is God the Father. They are gazing lovingly across the space between them upon the Father from whom the Son is begotten and from whom the Spirit proceeds. They are looking back to the origin that defines them. Similarly social distancing can help us to look at other people more deeply – to see them across the space as individuals valuable in their own right – and we see them like this because the space around is not filled with others getting in the way and providing distraction.

There is space in the icon – between the three figures but also around the table where there is room facing the viewer. At the bottom of the icon is the dais upon which the table stands and it is striking to our western eyes because we don't usually see things in inverse perspective. Our eyes tell us it ought to be the other way round – not tapering towards us but tapering off into the distance like telegraph poles do! It is this aspect of the composition that brings the perspective as we follow it to a point exactly where we are. It welcomes us – it draws us in- it asks us to take our place at the table, to fill the empty space that God has reserved for us. It is a profound invitation.

The Trinity Icon has been called the icon of hospitality and it can be powerfully relevant to us as we live out this coronavirus pandemic. In the social distancing that we see in the icon we are called to ponder our own social distancing here and now –and find it giving us an opportunity to reflect upon and explore our own individuality as we respond to the divine hospitality that welcomes us to our space in God's presence. But also the icon prompts us to see that across the space each individual is in relationship with the others. So across the space of our own social distancing there is always someone else – another person for us to recognise as a person - maybe a member of our household, maybe someone we pass in the park whilst exercising, maybe someone who doesn't keep the two meter rule. This person too made in God's image and offered too God's hospitality.

We talk about social distancing but this is a negative idea – speaking of protecting myself in all my frailty from others, of separation from others, of putting a distance between others and me. But perhaps it is better to think of it as social space that opens up possibilities for me to know myself more deeply, see others more sympathetically, and discover the amazing hospitality of God who calls both me and them to His table where an open space awaits so that we can be with Him for ever. Perhaps St. Francis who lived a couple of hundred years before Rublev painted this icon might have called social distancing “brother social distancing”. The icon leads us to conclude the same.