

# Rublev Icon

## *Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time*

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### Rublev's Icon of the Holy Trinity



Just as the Renaissance was transforming the cultural map of Europe, Rublev painted this picture at the apex of the icon tradition in Russia. An Icon is not just a painting of a scene but a window out of the apparent realities of everyday life into the realm of God. It hovered between two worlds, putting into colours and shapes what the intellect cannot grasp—rendering the invisible visible. Every paint stroke had a meaning hallowed by centuries of prayer.

Today, instead of preaching a sermon, I would like to introduce you to another way of connecting with God and his truths, another way to challenge us in our faith journey. Like the bible, Icons tend to grow in meaning the more they are used and can help us take concepts greater than our understanding.

This icon takes as its subject the mysterious story where Abraham receives three visitors as he camps by the oak of Mamre. He serves them a meal. As the conversation progresses, he seems to be talking straight to God, as if these 'angels' were somehow a metaphor for the three persons of the Trinity.

In Rublev's representation of the scene, the three gold-winged figures are seated around a white table on which a golden, chalice-like bowl contains a roasted lamb. In the background of the picture, a house can be seen at the top left and a tree in the centre. Less distinctly, a rocky hill lies in the upper right corner. The composition is a great circle around the table, focusing the attention on the chalice bowl at the centre, which reminds the viewer inescapably of an altar at Communion.

On one level, this picture shows three angels seated under Abraham's tree, but on another, it is a visual expression of what the Trinity means, the nature of God, and how we approach him. Reading the picture from left to right, we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All this is portrayed in the subtlety and ambiguity of colour and line. It only discloses itself as we spend time and prayer before it. It does not assert or preach and remains open to misunderstanding. It is less like a sermon than an encounter. After 'watching' this picture for a long time, I have seen these things. In your gaze, there will be many more.

Let us begin...

Note that the three faces are identical... (How might this help us to understand the nature of the Trinity?)

The figures can be enclosed in a circle

### **The Colours**

Rublev gives each person of the Trinity different clothing. On the right, the Holy Spirit has a garment of the clear blue of the sky, wrapped over with a robe of a fragile green. So the Spirit of creation moves in sky and water, breathes in heaven and earth. All living things owe their freshness to his touch.



The Son has the deepest colours. A thick heavy garment of the reddish-brown of earth and a cloak of the blue of heaven. In his person, he unites heaven and earth; the two natures are present in him. Over his right shoulder (the Government shall be upon his shoulder), there is a band of gold shot through the earthly garment as his divinity suffuses and transfigures his earthly being.

The Father seems to wear all the colours in a kind of fabric that changes with the light, seems transparent, and that cannot be described or confined in words. And this is how it should be. No one has seen the Father, but the vision of him fills the universe.

## **Gold**

The wings of the angels or persons are gold. Their seats are gold. The chalice in the centre is gold, and the roof of the house is. All is perfect, precious, and worthy whether they sit or fly. In stasis, when no activity is apparent on the part of God, his way is golden. His way is golden when he flies and blazes with power and unstoppable strength. And in the Sacrifice at the centre of all things, his way is golden.

But the light that shines around their heads is white, pure light. Gold is not enough to express the glory of God. Only light will do, and that same white becomes the holy table, the place of offering. God is revealed and disclosed at the heart in the whiteness of untouchable light.

## **The Two Movements.**

The Father looks forward, raising his hand in blessing to the Son. It is impossible to tell whether he looks up at the Son or down to the chalice on the table, but his gesture expresses a movement towards the Son. This is my Son; listen to him... The hand of the Son points on, around the circle, to the Spirit. In this simple array, we see the movement of life towards us, The Father sends the Son, and the Son sends the Spirit. The energy flows clockwise around the circle. And we complete the circle. As the Father sends the Son and the Son sends the Holy Spirit, we are invited and sent to complete the circle of the Godhead with our response. And we respond to the movement of the Spirit who points us to Jesus. And he shows us the Father in whom all things come to fruition. This is the counter-clockwise movement of our lives in response to the movement of God. And along the way are the three signs at the top of the picture: the hill, the tree, the house.

The Spirit touches us, even though we do not know who is touching us. He leads us in ways we may need to be made aware of, up the hill of prayer. It may be steep and rocky, but the journeying God goes before us along the path. It leads to Jesus, the Son of God, and it leads to a tree. In the heat of the day, a great tree spreads its shade. It is a place of security, a place of peace, a place where we begin to find out the possibilities of who we can be. It is no ordinary tree. It stands above the Son in the picture and above the altar table where the lamb lies within the chalice. Because of the sacrifice, this tree grows. The tree of death has been transformed into a tree of life for us.

The tree is on the way to the house. Over the head of the Father is the house of the Father. It is the goal of our journey. It is the beginning and end of our lives. Its roof is golden. Its door is always open for the traveller. It has a tower, and its window is always open so the Father can incessantly scan the roads to glimpse a returning prodigal.

### **Staff for the journey**

Each person holds a staff so long it cuts the picture into sections. Why should beings with wings that can fly like the light need a staff for their journey? Because we are on a journey, and these three persons enter into our journey, our slow movement across the face of the earth. Their feet are tired from travelling. God is with us in the weariness of our human road. The traveller God sits down at our ordinary tables and spreads them with a hint of heaven

### **The Table**

The table, or altar, lies at the centre of the picture. It is at once the place of Abraham's hospitality to the angels and God's place of hospitality to us. That ambiguity lies at the heart of communion, at the heart of worship. As soon as we open a sacred place for God to enter and be welcomed and adored, it becomes his place. It is we who are included; it is we who must 'take off our shoes' because of the holiness of the ground.

Contained in the centre of the circle, a sign of death. The lamb was killed. The holy meal was brought to the table. All points to this space, this mystery: within it, everything about God is summed up and expressed, his power, his glory, and above all, his love. And it is expressed in such a way that we can reach it. The space at this table is on our side. We are invited to join the group at the table and receive the heart of their being for ourselves. We are invited to complete the circle, to join the dance, to complete the movements of God in the world by our own response. Below the altar, a rectangle marks the holy place where the relics of the martyrs were kept in a church. It lies before us. It invites us to enter the depth and intimacy of all represented here. Come follow the Spirit up the hill of prayer. Come, live in the shadow of the Son of God; rest yourself beneath his tree of life. Come, journey to the home, prepared for you in the house of your Father. The table is spread, and the door is open. Come.

**AMEN**