

Art and reflection for Trinity Sunday 7th June prepared by Dr Sophia Errey

Although we now have online sites which profess to explain “The Mind-Blowing Mystery of the Trinity in Less Than 3 Minutes” the Mystery of God – Father, Son and Spirit – has challenged our human thinking since the first century.

The brilliant thinker St Augustine, (354-430), spent almost 30 years working on a book “On the Trinity” which many consider his masterpiece. Although he himself considered it unfinished, it began to be circulated about 17 years after he had begun.

In connection with his statement that the book was not complete, a legend arose, which became very popular in the late Middle Ages, and continues to be repeated today. According to the English edition of Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, the source for many saints’ lives, Augustine was walking by the sea, pondering “On the Trinity”. He stopped to watch a little child, who was scooping up seawater in a shell, and pouring it into a hole in the sand. Puzzled, he asked what this was for, and the child explained he was seeking to empty the sea.

‘What?’ Augustine said. ‘That is impossible. Obviously, the sea is too large and the hole too small.’ ‘Indeed,’ said the child, ‘but I will sooner draw all the water from the sea and empty it into this hole than you will succeed in penetrating the mystery of the Holy Trinity with your limited understanding.’

In 1463 the talented painter Benozzo Gozzoli moved from Florence to the hillside town of San Gimignano in an effort to escape the plague. There, between 1464 and 1465 he and his team painted a large chapel in the church of the Augustine Friars with episodes from the life of the saint. He included a painting of the child by the sea, which inspired numerous other images.



Representing the Trinity is also a big challenge for artists. One of the most famous versions is that by Masaccio in Santa Maria Novella in Florence, painted in fresco on the wall around 1426-8 – it is about 1.25 X 6.67m in size.



The brilliant young artist was one of several Florentines who developed the use of one-point perspective, allowing them to make images which were much more spatially convincing than earlier systems. Here Masaccio uses perspective in a radical way. The tomb and skeleton at the base is at our eye-level as we stand in front of the painting. The two kneeling donors – we don't know who they were – therefore appear to be above us. Mary and John at the foot of the cross are higher still, and Jesus, hanging on the cross, is more radically foreshortened as we gaze up at Him. Although barely visible in reproductions, the Spirit, in the form of a dove, appears over Christ's left shoulder. However, the figure of God the Father is not foreshortened at all – He is outside the limitations of space and time as we perceive them. The barrel vault above is also highly innovative, since no such classical structure had been actually built at that time in the early Renaissance.

Writer Jack Flam has described this painting as "both the most rational and the most mysterious of images."

Theologians early identified the account of the Three who came to Abraham at Mamre as an appearance of the Trinity.

Genesis 18.1 The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3 He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

John of Damascus (675-749), one of the Doctors of the Church, memorably noted "Three he saw, and One he worshipped."

In the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, carried out in the 430's, the Three already appear with the central One haloed in light and with one hand raised in blessing, identifying Him as Christ.



The Three became a staple of Eastern icon images, with Christ often singled out by a halo inscribed with "Ego eimi" (I AM). However a church council of 1551 forbade this practice and it is no longer used in icons.

Far and away the most famous version of this Trinity is that by Andrei Rublev (around 1411 or 1425). The artist used subtle details to distinguish the three figures. The Spirit, on our right, is clothed in green and blue, the colours of Earth, where the Spirit is present in all things. (In Orthodox churches the decoration for Pentecost, and worshipper's clothes for the celebration, are green, rather than our red.) Christ, in the centre, wears the traditional red and blue, symbolizing the mingling of His humanity (red) and divinity (blue). His hand extends over the cup, in a gesture of blessing, and behind Him looms a tree – both the oak of Mamre, and an allusion to the Cross. Both Son and Spirit turn toward the Father and the Three are enveloped in an atmosphere of mutual communion, the visual rhythm of movement between the figures suggesting the ancient concept of *perichoresis*, a relationship of mutual giving and receiving, and a relationship into which we, the spectators, are drawn.

