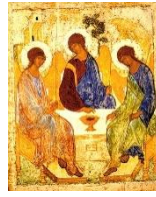


IMAGES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Andrei Rublev (1360–1430), *Angels at Mamre (Holy Trinity)*, icon, 1411 or 1425-27, Tempera, 142 cm × 114 cm Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Peter Stuart

Today is Trinity Sunday. And Phyllis and I want to explore with you the principal images of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, with the Trinity in mind.

Some of you may be familiar with this story:

One day, Jesus asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And his disciples answered, 'Some say that you are John the Baptist returned from the dead. Others say Elijah or one of the ancient prophets.' And then Jesus asked, 'But who do **you** say that I am?' Peter answered, 'Thou art the Logos, existing in the Father as His rationality and then, by an act of His will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to his creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple.' And Jesus said, 'What?'

All orthodox Christianity is Trinitarian. Christianity is not a 'me and Jesus' religion; it's a 'Trinity and us' religion. Now doctrine has its important place. Ultimately however the Trinity is more an experience in which we can participate than a concept we can clearly define and explain. The difficulty is in **teaching** about the Trinity. The doctrine can seem so abstract and remote. And yet the doctrine arises out of the warm intimate **experience** of Christians. We experience God in three persons, as Father, as Jesus the Son, and as the Holy Spirit, three and yet one. The experience preceded the doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity is the human mind of Christians struggling to find concepts to fit. John Stott put the experience well: 'The Christian faith is essentially Trinitarian. We come to the Father through the Son and by the Spirit, and the Father comes to us through the Son by the Spirit'.

Sometimes images can fill the gap when concepts and logical analysis fall short. When it comes to portraying the Trinity, however, these nearly always fail. Painters have tried to combine a Father figure, a Christ figure, and a Dove, and the result is often bizarre. We won't show you any of these, out of reverence for the Holy Mystery Who Is God.

Phyllis Mossman:

Nevertheless here's one famous icon which has become a revered symbol of the Holy Trinity. Remember the story in Genesis about Abraham giving hospitality to a stranger at the oak of Mamre. Christian reflection has played on the mysterious back and forth changes of

identity and number of that stranger: now angel, now God, now one figure, now three. Here the Russian icon-writer Rublev dives deep into the story, and turns it into an image of the divine hospitality of God the Trinity, who becomes not the guest but the host, inviting us to the table of life.

The figures of angels are arranged so that the outlines of their bodies form a full circle. In this icon there's one limitation which we'll return to later: the figures are static, yet God is dynamic. Is 'God' a 'noun', or a 'verb'? Or both, and if so, how do we capture the 'both'?

Another simpler mental image of the Trinity which works (so long as we don't try to express it too literally in art) is that of a man with arms and hands reaching down. That image comes from Saint Irenaeus in the 2nd Christian century. He taught that God the Father acts in the world he has created through the Son and through the Holy Spirit - His two 'hands'.

Peter:

I find that helpful. And so we come now to the Holy Spirit, and how He (or She) has been imaged in Scripture and Christian art. There are six main images in Scripture: wind; breath; fire; oil; water; dove. It's sometimes been said that 'the Son reveals the Father and the Spirit reveals the Son, but the Spirit has no one to reveal **Him** and is therefore mysterious'. There's some truth in that, but the images are vivid enough - so long as we don't try to combine them in one picture, otherwise we end up with doves on fire. And in each of the five separate images there's a dynamism which works in the human mind and spirit.

Hyatt Moore, *Pentecost*, late 20th-21st C, oil over acrylic on canvas, 24 x 48 inches, Private Collection USA



Let's start with two which **can** go together: wind and fire, the two images from the day of Pentecost. WE read in Acts [2:1-23], 'When the day of Pentecost came they were all together in one place. *Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit*'.

What's going on? Good question. The crowd outside didn't know; the disciples had a glimmering, eventually.

This artist, Hyatt Moore, wrote 'when I was approached to make a painting to represent the Biblical book of Acts, I had too many ideas. My sketch book began filling up with studies of characters, all interesting, but no one of them representing all. So I took the abstract approach of the coming of that which the believers had been waiting for...even if they had no idea what exactly they were waiting for. A mighty wind. Fire in the air. Amazing how these things take us by surprise, and change everything.'

Benjamin West, *Joshua passing the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant*, 1800, oil on wood, 677x 895mm, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales



Now in Greek, one word for wind is *pneuma*; in Hebrew it's *ruach*. More explosive. Wind is power, energy. In the Old Testament, the *ruach* of God is often Wellington wind, not a gentle zephyr. And it's often associated with fire, accompanying a self-revelation of God. The primary example of this is at Mt Sinai, when the Law was given and the Covenant sealed. Another is when Joshua crossed the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant, seen in this painting by Benjamin West, an Anglo-American painter around the time of the American War of Independence. This whole Wilderness experience is the background to the Jewish feast of Pentecost.

By the time of Jesus, the Spirit of God had become so remote from Jewish life and experience that the return of the Spirit was one of the expected signs associated with the coming of the hoped-for Messiah, the anointed one. And then it would be the whole people of Israel who would receive the Holy Spirit, not just a special few.

For us Christians, the essential content of this image is power, power for two things especially:

- Power to witness to Christ We read in the Book of Acts that Jesus said '*You will receive power when the Spirit comes upon you: and you will bear witness to me...to the farthest corners of the earth*' [Acts 1:8].
- Power to push forward the frontiers of the Kingdom of God at the expense of the kingdom of darkness. Jesus said, '*If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out the devils, then be sure the Kingdom of God has already come upon you*' [Matthew 12:28].

Phyllis:

In West's painting you can't see the Spirit, just as you can't see the wind: you know it's there by its effects. You know a painting is about a windy day when it depicts a sailing ship with full sails; you know the Holy Spirit is present when there is powerful witness and powerful confrontation with evil.

El Greco, *Pentecost*, c. 1600. Oil on canvas, 275 x 127 cm, Madrid Museo del Prado



'Fire' similarly has effects, but we can see fire, and it's a more multiple symbol than 'wind'.

- *Fire purifies*. The Spirit is the *Holy Spirit*. Fire in the Bible is a symbol of God's holiness as judge of the world. The Spirit burns away what in us is displeasing to Him.

- *Fire warms.* The Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts, as St Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans. The precious realisation in the depth of our being that God loves us just as we are, even though He wants to transform us into Christ's image.
- *Fire gives light, it illuminates.* The Spirit of truth guides us, points us to Christ and to the way to follow Him, as the Pillar of Fire guided the Israelites in the Wilderness.

What do you think the flames of fire resting on each disciple at Pentecost signified? Probably all three of these meanings.

This painting from 1600 by El Greco, who came from Crete and worked mainly in Spain, depicts the moment when the Holy Spirit, in the form of flames, rests on the Virgin and the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. El Greco's work is suffused with expressionistic intensity and spirituality.

So putting the symbols of wind and fire of the day of Pentecost together, we come up with a strong commissioning by the Holy Spirit for mission:

- power to witness and to overcome the kingdom of darkness;
- purification for that mission;
- assurance of God's love during that mission; and
- illumination about Jesus as the Truth and how to follow Him in the Way.

Anyone who thinks that being filled with the Spirit means having nice warm peaceful feelings needs to think again.

Peter:

Picture of a hongi



The next symbol is breath.

Here we see the gentle and highly symbolic Maori greeting, the hongi. It's a very precious part of Maori culture. It means you acknowledge that you breathe the same air, share the same life-force. Now turn to the Bible. In Genesis [2:7] we read '*The LORD God formed a human being from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*'. And in John's Gospel [20:19-23] we read how the risen Jesus '*came and stood among them. 'Peace be with you!' he said....'As the Father sent me, so I send you.'* Then he breathed on them, saying '*Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.*' Thus Jesus empowers his disciples to bring peace, shalom, which is abundant life, to others, based on the forgiveness He gives. And the English word 'spirit' comes from the Latin word 'spiritus', breath or wind.

Duccio di Buoninsegna (1260–1318), *Christ Taking Leave of the Apostles*, 1308-1311, tempera on wood, 50 cm x 53 cm, Siena: Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo



Here we see a panel, *Christ taking leave of the Apostles*, made for Siena Cathedral by Duccio in the early 14th century.

It's a poignant image and I think reflects the uncertainties the disciples were feeling, after the hammer-blow of the Crucifixion of Jesus and the stunning wonder of His resurrection. It's also trying to convey the gentle power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised them. But the artist can't bring himself to portray Jesus actually breathing on his disciples. (And a hongi wouldn't quite have done it either, for that's a symbol of mutual giving, not one-way bestowal.)

Phyllis:

Jar of oil



We come now to oil, olive oil, as an image of the Holy Spirit.

In Scripture, anointing with oil can symbolise the work of the Spirit in consecrating a priest or a king in Israel.

Paolo Veronese *Anointing of David*, 1555-1560, oil painting, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien



Here's the Renaissance Venetian artist Veronese's crowded and very aristocratic painting of the prophet Samuel anointing David as future king of Israel. Samuel is pouring oil above the young shepherd boy David, who kneels at the altar. In the First Book of Samuel we read '*The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the man". Samuel took the horn [of oil] and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the spirit of the LORD came upon David and was with him from that day onwards.*' [1 Samuel 16:12-13]

The word 'Messiah' means 'the anointed one'. Later the hope emerged that a new David would come as Messiah to deliver Israel. As 'Messiah', Jesus fulfils that hope, bringing the

shalom and the justice of the promised Kingdom. We too are anointed with the Spirit. 'Christened' literally means 'anointed'. Some people experience the touch of the Holy Spirit as an almost physical anointing with oil. The very name 'Christians' means the followers of the Anointed One; we are His anointed representatives, a royal priesthood., set apart to bring shalom to a fallen world.

And part of that shalom is healing, and so oil is the sacrament of healing in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the letter of James [5:14], we read *'Is one of you ill? Let him send for the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord'*.

Now it's said that oil and water don't mix, but they certainly do when they are images and channels of the Holy Spirit. Baptism – initiation into the Body of Christ, the Church – always involves water and often involves anointing as well, and both symbolise the presence of the Spirit. The inward gift of Christian baptism is the Holy Spirit, received through Christ. In John's Gospel [1:33] we read John the Baptist's testimony: *'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is to baptise in Holy Spirit'*. This man was Jesus.

Hokusai Katsushika Hokusai 1760-1849, *The great wave off Kanagawa*, c. 1830, colour woodblock print



Peter:

Water is an especially rich image. It cleanses. It destroys, even kills. It gives life.

- Water cleanses. The Spirit cleanses us from sin, conveying forgiveness, and then steadily transforms us into the likeness of Christ.
- Water drowns. The cleansing of the Spirit begins in baptism, and is not always comfortable! The Spirit convicts us of sin, and begins our life-long struggle of what's traditionally called 'mortification', our putting to death the ingrained habits of our fallen humanity, drowning them as it were. We are immersed in the waters, which separate us from our old life.

This is the Japanese artist Hokusai's colour woodblock print of the *Great Wave off Kanagawa*, from about 1830. It depicts an enormous wave (maybe a tsunami) threatening boats off the coast of modern Yokohama, with Mount Fujiyama in the background.

Sithembiso Sibisi (Born Durban, 1976 d. Johannesburg 2006), *Baptism-Spiritual Healing in the Sea*, 2005, Oil on canvas



Sithembiso Sibisi was a South African artist, interested in initiation rituals. His oil painting here, called *Baptism-Spiritual Healing in the Sea*, was done in 2005.

It's been said that 'In this work he introduced contemporary elements, such as a surfer and an oil tanker out at sea, as if to indicate the growing incongruity of such rituals in the contemporary world.'

Incongruous, perhaps, yet vividly illustrating the power of water as an enduring symbol.

Picture of people seeking water in Zimbabwe during a drought



- And water gives life. Without water we die. This photograph was taken in Zimbabwe during a drought.

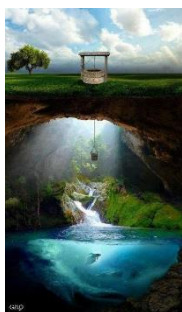
Kingsley Gunatileke. *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well – The Water of Life*, clay, Tulana, Sri Lanka



Yet however much water we have, Jesus tells us, as he told the Samaritan woman, '*everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never again be thirsty. The water I shall give will be a spring of water within him, welling up and bringing eternal life*' ([John 4:13-14]). The Holy Spirit fills us, satisfies our thirst for God.

This image in clay was made by a Sri Lankan Buddhist, Kingsley Gunatileke, after he and other Buddhist artists were invited to respond to stories from the New Testament, including the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

Well and spring



And here's a visionary picture of the spring of that life-giving water within us which Jesus promises us. We know the source of that water in this rich and powerful picture.

Phyllis:

Hans Feibusch, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1951, mural, Baptistry, Chichester Cathedral



Our final image of the Holy Spirit is the Dove. A somewhat fragile image, until we start to probe its full meaning.

Hans Feibusch was a 20th Century German artist of Jewish heritage who lived in Britain. He converted to Christianity and was baptised and confirmed in the Anglican Church. Here's his mural painting in the baptistry at Chichester Cathedral, showing John baptising Christ with the dove symbolising the Holy Spirit.

Mark's Gospel tells us *'It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. As he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens break open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.'* [1:9-10]

Noah sending forth the dove, mosaic, Monreale Cathedral, Palermo, Italy



Behind this passage lie the first words of Genesis [1:1-2] *'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water.'* The Hebrew word for hovering is used of a bird hovering. By the time of Jesus, Rabbinic teaching was identifying that bird as a dove. Why? Because Noah sent forth a dove when the Ark was afloat on the waters of chaos unleashed by human disobedience.

And so the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus represents a *new* creation, a *new* age. The baptism of Jesus launches him into his ministry as Messiah, announcing the Kingdom of God. And the Spirit hovers over *us*, descends upon *us*, as part of the New Creation. As St Paul wrote, *'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation'* [2 Corinthians 5:17].

Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Christian Holy Spirit as a dove*, c. 1660, stained glass, apse of Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican



The Holy Spirit as Dove broods over the New Creation in Christ, shaping the New Creation, shaping us to proclaim the Kingdom of God at the heart of the New Creation.

Here we see is a Baroque version of the Holy Spirit as a dove, designed by Bernini in stained glass, for St Peter's in the Vatican. And it's an arresting dove, a strong image to be taken seriously.

Peter:

*Three Dancing Maidens, Untermyer Fountain, Conservatory Garden, Central Park, bronze cast of Walter Schott's sculpture, completed in Germany before 1910*



We come back now to the Holy Trinity, the sublime Reality so difficult to represent in art. There is, however, one art which provides a vivid expression of one aspect of this sacred Mystery. And that's dancing. Yes, dancing! In the Early Church, theologians used a Greek word to describe the life of the Trinity, *perichoresis*. *Peri* means 'around' and *chorea* means 'dance'. It refers to the divine dance: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit joyfully engaged in an everlasting dance, weaving together as one, overflowing with creativity and love. The being and activity of the Spirit is precisely the same being and activity of the Father and of the Son.

(This picture is of a sculpture, *Three dancing maidens*, in the Conservatory Garden of New York's Central Park.)

In Romans [5:5], Paul speaks of '*God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*' The divine dance of the Trinity overflows with love, which pours into our hearts, pulling us and tugging us in, to participate in this heavenly dance. I could also say 'cosmic' dance, for the created cosmos throbs with it.

God is the Divine Community, and we find our own true community when we're drawn into God. In John's Gospel [16:13], Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the One who will guide us into the same unity which He enjoys with the Father ('*When the Spirit comes, he will guide you*'). We're invited to follow the Spirit's lead in order to learn the steps and feel the rhythm of the Trinity in our hearts.

We can learn to feel that rhythm anywhere, but supremely in the act of common worship. In prayer we join the angels in the eternal dance with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is

why our common prayer is so important. What we do this morning is participate in the *perichoresis*, the heavenly choreography of the Trinity. This is where we experience and enjoy the Trinity, how we taste and see that the Lord is good. By regularly worshipping together, we learn to dance to the same beat of the Trinity and go on to allow that rhythm to infuse our whole lives. This infusion the Orthodox Church calls, 'deification'. Deification: being filled with God in all that we are - and do. (For God, remember, is not only a 'noun', but also a 'verb'). As Scripture says, '*We come to share in the very being of God*'. (2 Peter 1:4)

Let's finish by proclaiming together this great statement from a Greek Orthodox leader, Metropolitan Ignatius of Latakia (slightly adapted). Your part is bold print.

(together)

**Without the Holy Spirit
Christ stays in the past
The Gospel is a dead letter
The Church is simply an organisation
Authority a matter of domination
Mission is a matter of propaganda
The liturgy is no more than an evocation
And Christian living a slave morality**

(Leader): But in the Holy Spirit

The cosmos is resurrected and groans with the birth pangs of the Kingdom.

Alleluia!

The Risen Christ is here.

Alleluia!

The Gospel is the power of life

Alleluia!

The Church shows forth the life of the Trinity

Alleluia!

Authority is a service that sets people free

Alleluia!

Mission is a Pentecost

Alleluia!

The liturgy is both memorial and anticipation

Alleluia!

And human action is deified.

Alleluia! Amen!

An art sermon presented in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne on 11 June 2017 by Dr Phyllis Mossman and the Revd Canon Peter Stuart