

Matthew 28:16-20

I know it's hard to imagine but as a teenager I was tall and uncoordinated. But it wasn't all bad, having unnaturally long legs I could run like the wind. It came then as no big surprise when the headmaster asked me to coach the wee boys in running relays. At first I was pretty naive about running relays, but for the glory of Robbie Burns House I wanted to do my best. I got the very fastest runners together, but I soon discovered it mattered very little how fast they ran but how well they .....changed the batons.

Mistakes happened at baton change time. The new runner could run off too quickly, the old runner could peter out before they got there, they could have the baton in the wrong hand, or not let go, or indeed, let go too soon. One genius ran right round without a baton at all!

So we practised really hard. The run in, the smooth change and the running off.

The big day arrived. Their they were in their Burns House bright yellow singlets. Freezing in the Dunedin summer cold easterly. We had the 4 x 100, the 4 x 200 and the 4 x 400. Would my teams come through? The gun went off ... more of that later.

Today Jesus is giving his final instructions to his disciples. It's like a baton change. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit he said to them. In other words hand on the baton of your faith.

It's not hard to see why this reading is the gospel for Trinity Sunday. It has from Jesus own lips the formula for the Trinity: in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If you ever find yourself in the dreadful position of defending the Trinity against people who say it's not biblical or that it was made up in the 3rd century, remember this passage.

One of the classic explanations of the Trinity is an icon by Andrei Rublev. For Orthodox Christians, icons are like windows onto God. I have a special devotion to this icon because each day at morning prayer when I served at the Cathedral I used to gaze at it. Dating from about 1410 each layer of paint was put on with prayer and fasting. Andrei broke with tradition. He took for his text the Genesis passage of the mysterious meeting of Sarah and Abraham had with 3 angels (or, as later Christians have recognised them, the Trinity). We can see Sarah and Abraham's house in the background.

It has so much to teach us. Andrei is the first to use the composition of a great circle around the table. This focuses the attention of the viewer on the chalice-bowl at the centre which, in turn, reminds the viewer inescapably of an altar at Communion.

Reading the picture from left to right, we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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.

The Son has the deepest colours; a thick heavy garment of the reddish-brown of the earth and a cloak of the blue of heaven. He unites heaven and earth, and over his right shoulder (the Government shall be upon his shoulder) there is a band of gold.

The Father seems to wear all the colours that seem transparent, colours that cannot be described or confined in words. No one has seen the Father, but the vision of him fills the universe.

We are invited to complete the circle, to join the meal. The icon invites us to come into the depth and intimacy of all that is represented here. Come follow the Spirit up the hill of prayer. Come, live in the shadow of the Son of God, rest yourself beneath the Tree of Life. Come, journey to the home prepared for you in the house of your Father.

The table is spread, the door is open. Come.

One book I read suggested that the little rectangular box at the bottom would have contained the relics of a saint on the inside and on the outside a mirror. The idea is easy to understand: as we gaze on God we are invited to share in the meal, we are invited to become one with the Trinity, we are caught up in the eternal embrace of love, we are invited into communion with God.

This can seem a long way from living out our faith making disciples, until we remember that as God invites us into the heavenly banquet . We are to be inviting others to share our meals. To be a people of God who are making disciples is to be offering hospitality to one another.

The simple offering of hospitality is almost a dead art form.

Admittedly a lot has changed since I was young, but each Sunday Mum would put on the Sunday roast. (She had finally worked out how to get the oven to come on automatically.) We would go to church and then most Sundays we would invite someone around for lunch, someone we didn't know. One of those someones, I can remember, often smelt funny.

Worshipping at St Luke's in Manchester Street, Rosemary and I are products of this sort of hospitality. Each month we had a young adults lunch. The friends we made from that group we still keep in touch with. Some of them have even been ordained.

Christianity, at its heart, is all about community. We know God best as a community of love. We can't do it on our own. We can't pass the baton of faith without hospitality.

Do we still invite the stranger to our homes? Do we still invite one another?

One newly ordained person asked me "Do people still invite one another to meals?" He had been in his new parish a year and no one had invited him or his family around. He assured me he had good underarm deodorant and he was house trained!

Is it that we make the offering of hospitality too complex? We need to remember Jesus words - just a cup of water offered in my name is enough.

To hand on the baton of faith is to extend hospitality to others. It is to offer to others what we ourselves receive from God; a seat at the table. As for our boys in their yellow singlets we won every race that year.