

Abraham and the 3 visitors

St Mary and St John, Hinxton Trinity 3

21 June 2026

We are surrounded by icons. Whether it's the WhatsApp icon, the Teams icon or the British Rail icon there are thousands of these symbols and pictures which we associate with a product, service or institution. But these icons are very trivial compared to what is really meant by an icon. An icon in a church setting is something which takes us from the everyday into the divine. For the artist who creates an icon it is more than just a painting it is also a prayer and an act of worship. Which is how an icon should be treated.

Until recently our western churches haven't really understood why icons are so important in the Eastern Orthodox churches. We have regarded it as rather idolatrous for a worshipper to kiss an icon of Jesus or to light a candle at an icon of a saint. But for the worshipper an icon is not merely wood and paint but a window into the sacred.

I have five very special icons at home - one of the Archangel Michael (given to me by daughter when I was ordained), another of Christ, two of Mary and one of the Holy Trinity. In the Orthodox Church, 'icons have always been understood as a visible gospel'. When a person kisses an icon of Jesus, they are not worshipping the icon as an idol but expressing their love of Christ. An icon is not judged by how good a painting it is but how effectively it transports us into the divine.



So, I'd like to speak about Andrei Rublev's *The Hospitality of Abraham (Icon of The Holy Trinity; The Old Testament Trinity)*, c.1420s, Levkas and tempera on panel, 142 x 114 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. It is one of the greatest masterpieces of Russian iconography. It is based on the story we heard read a moment ago from Genesis 18, Abraham's hospitality to the three visitors.

What makes this icon so intriguing is that throughout the Genesis story it is not entirely clear who the three visitors are and the purpose of their visit.

At one level the story is just about very generous hospitality. So, let's glimpse into the ancient near eastern nomadic world four thousand years' ago. Abraham, as head of his tribe, has pitched his tent yet again at a site simply known as 'The oaks at Mamre' just outside Hebron. It is midday and very hot, Abraham is sitting just inside his tent, out of the burning sun. At that moment three strangers unexpectedly arrive. Abraham immediately leaps to his feet and enthusiastically welcomes them. The custom of those days was to treat all travellers with very great respect; for strangers come from other worlds and might bring with them goods and exotic tales of far away cultures. They might also be angels or divine messengers.

Abraham bows before them, he doesn't know who they are, but to be on the safe side he treats them as people of great importance. One of them appears to be of greater status than the other two and so he addresses him as 'my lord' and invites them all to stay, wash the dust off their feet, relax in the shade and have a meal. The men accept the invitation and without further ado Abraham rushes round providing water, ordering his wife Sarah to bake cakes. He slaughters a prize calf from the herd and instructs his servant to prepare and cook it and lavishly serve it with a sauce of curds and milk. But in accordance with the rules of hospitality Abraham does not eat nor does he sit with them; he stands and is on hand to serve the needs of his guests. Although his wife Sarah has high status as wife to the head of the tribe, she remains, as custom dictates, inside the tent.

So, Abraham the man of faith, has meticulously fulfilled the rituals of hospitality – invitation, washing, feeding and a chance to relax.

But the next part of our story upsets this idyllic moment and adds an air of mystery. The travellers already appear to know Sarah's name, and they announce that within a year she will have a child. They know she can hear even though Sarah is lurking in the shadows of the tent and when she hears this, she laughs at the absurdity that she who is past child-bearing age will have a child. But the senior visitor senses her incredulous laugh and despite her protestations to the contrary, without fuss simply says to her, 'Oh yes, you did laugh' (Gen 18:15).

The scene with Sarah deliberately upsets all Abraham's carefully executed rites of hospitality; and now the reason for the three travellers' appearance becomes clearer. They are really angels on their way to bring judgement on the towns of Sodom and

Gomorrah – famed for their incivility and lack of hospitality in complete contrast to Abraham. Their task here is to tell Sarah of God's promise of the birth of Isaac as a sign of his covenantal love for his people.

So, to return to Rublev's icon. For centuries Jewish and Christian commentators have offered different interpretations about who the three travellers are. For the rabbis the three men are God and his angels, but by the 4th century St Augustine offered what has become for Christians the standard interpretation: the three visitors as representations of the Holy Trinity.

Rublev's icon entertains all these ideas. Above all his icon captures a wonderful sense of peace and harmony between the three angels as they rest at Abraham's tent. Have you noticed that their faces are identical? For although each person of the Trinity is distinct, they are in essence one.

And finally have you noticed that you are in fact Abraham?! For you are standing and offering your service and hospitality to the three travellers – as is our Christian duty, but we are also worshipping the three persons of the Holy Trinity, whose blessings we hope for but do not presume. The icon is more than paint it is I hope you might agree, a little window into the sacred.