The Seventh Easter Reflection and Music for week of 7 June 2020:

A Reflection for Trinity Sunday Peter’s College Oxford

The Chaplain writes: I am grateful to the Rev Canon Geoff Maughan for writing this reflection for us. He compares Rembrandt’s Annunciation (1635) with Fra Angelico’s portrayal of the Annunciation (1425-6).

Fra Angelico’s portrayal of the Annunciation (1425-6) had measured distance and respectable space between the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary.
Rembrandt in his 17th Century drawing has dispensed with all that medieval propriety. No social distance at all! What a shock for us who are used to keeping our distance in lockdown Coronavirus quarantine. The unexpected invasion of Mary’s space by a heavenly angel catches Mary off-balance. There is a sense of rush and clatter and sudden scattering of her domestic routine in Rembrandt’s drawing. Can this be happening? Something scandalously transformative is going on! There is an over-shadowing of the girl and something mysterious occurring between them as the angel envelops her. As St Luke puts it, Mary says ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ Rembrandt is capturing a central truth of the Christian faith: that God did not want to keep his distance from us, but came right into our world through the incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ. ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ John 1: 14. And the bible on Mary’s lap is slipping onto the floor as something better than a written text is coming into the world.

I am reminded of Quentin Blake’s picture of the meeting between Sophie and the BFG in Roald Dahl’s story. The space between the two of them is full of meaning: open encounter, excited curiosity, warmth and kindness. The BFG says ‘I is a nice and jumbly Giant! I is the only nice and jumbly Giant in Giant Country! I is the BIG FRIENDLY GIANT! The BFG. What is your name?’ ‘My name is Sophie.’
The first Christian disciples had this kind of experience of meeting God in the person of Jesus. In the cut and thrust of their ordinary lives they found an astonishing sense of God having arrived in their midst, as they got to know Jesus.

One of the things they began to ask questions about was ‘So where is God then?’ They were good Jewish believers. They knew that God was ‘up there’, sustaining the universe with his power and might. But now they were encountering God in a new mode and context: in the middle of everyday life and in the person of a human being who claimed to have ‘come down from heaven’ (John 6:38-51). As Jesus prepared to leave his disciples, he promised them that after his death he would still be with them, not in physical form but spiritually within them. This, said Jesus, would be a new level of personal intimacy with God whose Spirit would fill and empower them to embody God’s love in the world. The intimacy that Rembrandt captured in his drawing of the Annunciation was to presage a whole new dimension of spiritual experience for all who believed in Jesus Christ. It would be equally disturbing and transformational for all it touched.
As the early Christians reflected on the massive significance of all this, they were compelled to re-write their doctrine of God. Their experience led them to conclude that they had come to know God as the Creator of the universe, as the incarnate Son of God Jesus Christ, and as the Holy Spirit who now lived within them; but this was still the One and Only God whom the Jews had always worshipped as ‘I am who I am’ (Jahweh). We now call this the doctrine of the Trinity, complex but essentially entailed by the disturbing historical reality of what Rembrandt portrayed in his drawing of the Annunciation.

To return to the theme of ‘spaces in between persons’: Rembrandt removed the space between the angel and Mary to capture the radical arrival of God in our midst. The gospel of John portrays our journey of faith as one of being invited into the spaces between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Through Christ we are to join in the life of the Trinity, to experience the flow of love and grace and life that fills the spaces between the persons of the Godhead, and to find our home in that place of divine acceptance. For me in the midst of personal lockdown, this is a comfort and an assurance that we were indeed created for intimacy and love, even though it often feels a far distant reality.

**Prayer**

Bless us O God, Father Son and Holy Spirit with a vision of your glory. May we know you as the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us and be strong in the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us. Keep us steadfast in the faith and in the knowledge of your love and bring us to your eternal kingdom. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

**A Note on the music:** Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Praise the Name of the Lord*

For the Season of Trinity, the Choir’s anthem takes us to Moscow, a long way from our Anglican home, and to the music of Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943). Fortunately we now live in eclectic times: our repertory is no longer defined as running from Tallis to Howells
passing by Purcell and Stanford, marvellous though their music is. *Praise the Name of the Lord* is one of the shorter movements in Rachmaninoff’s liturgical masterpiece, *The All-Night Vigil*. It was written and first performed in 1915. Two years later, it became unperformable in Russia as the country collapsed into the Soviet Union. The Russian Orthodox Church was chased out of the composer’s homeland, and Rachmaninoff also found himself exiled. The backbone of *Praise the Name of the Lord* is the Znamennyi chant heard in the alto and bass voices. Within its narrow compass, it has an exultant character, reinforced by Rachmaninoff’s troika-like setting. The text is a short paean, with overtones of the Benedicite and Psalm 136, fitting the theme of Trinity Sunday. In this performance, we are joined by Lucy Cox, a former member of St Peter’s Choir. Our thanks are owed to Professor Julie Curtis, who kindly guided us in the matter of the pronunciation of Church Slavonic.

Translation from the Church Slavonic

Praise the Name of the Lord. Alleluia.
Praise the Lord, O Ye His servants. Alleluia.
Blessed be the Lord out of Sion.
He who dwells in Jerusalem. Alleluia.
O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good. Alleluia.
For His mercy endures forever. Alleluia.
O give thanks unto the God of Heaven. Alleluia.
For His mercy endures forever. Alleluia.