

The two examples that I have chosen to discuss are the Six Psalms and the icon known as the Hospitality of Abraham.

The Six Psalms (Numbers 3, 37, 62, 87, 102 and 142) are read in the Matins service of the Orthodox Church, which is part of the All-Night Vigil in the Russian Church. These are read very solemnly, with the church darkened and the people standing quietly. In some churches even the candles are extinguished. I have heard it said that these six Psalms will be read to us by our guardian angel at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

The Six Psalms reflect salvation history as they move from sorrow to joy. The darkened Church depicts the darkness of the world until the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

In Psalm 3 the psalmist asks “Why are they multiplied that afflict me?” and “Many say unto my soul: There is no salvation for him in his God.” He responds with “Salvation is of the Lord, and Thy blessing is upon They people.” This is a Psalm of hope, that God will not abandon His people but will bring us salvation.

Psalm 37 has a desperate tone, as the Psalmist writes of his suffering and fear of God’s wrath. His “iniquities are risen higher than my head; as a heavy burden have they pressed heavily upon me.” He cries to God “Forsake me not, O Lord my God, depart not from me.” This is the state of everyone- we all need a Savior. All our sins have risen higher than our heads. We all cry out “Be attentive unto my help, O Lord of my salvation” when we pray over and over in Church “Lord, have mercy.”

Psalm 62 speaks of the thirst that we have for God and is more joyful in tone: “For Thou art become my helper; in the shelter of Thy wings will I rejoice.” This reminds me that the Holy Spirit is our helper: “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (John 14:16 NASB).

Psalm 87 describes the gloominess of the afterlife before Christ came to “trample down death by death.” It depicts the darkness of the world before the Incarnation of Christ. This Psalm is the darkest of the dark.

Psalm 102 takes on a completely different tone; it is full of hope and joy. It speaks of God “Who is gracious unto all thine iniquities, Who healeth all thine infirmities, Who redeemeth they life from corruption....” This describes the forgiveness of sins God offers His people through Jesus Christ, Who heals us and saves us. “Redeeming our lives from corruption” is a reference to Christ’s resurrection and our own future resurrection.

In Psalm 42 the Psalmist asks that the Lord not enter into judgment against us and speaks of the enemy of our souls who persecutes us. “Rescue me from mine enemies,

O Lord; unto Thee have I fled for refuge” and “Thy good Spirit shall lead me in the land of uprightness; for Thy name’s sake...” This Psalm is also a Psalm of hope.

To summarize, the Six Psalms lead the people through the depths of despair to hope. They present a picture of human history: Sin, fear of the consequences of sin and death, and joy in the salvation of the Lord.

The icon of the Hospitality of Abraham (of St. Andrei Rublev) depicts three angelic persons seated around a table. This icon is taken from Genesis chapter 18, which is the account of the three angels visiting Abraham and Sarah at the Oaks of Mamre and is also called “The Holy Trinity.” (From what I can tell from my reading, this is the only type of iconic depiction of the Holy Trinity that is permissible.) In the Liturgy we sing “Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are full of your glory!” and we chant:

All-Holy Trinity, have mercy on us.  
Lord, cleanse us from our sins.  
Master, pardon our iniquities.  
Holy God, visit and heal us  
For Thy Name’s sake.

In my reading I saw several attempts to identify the members of the Holy Trinity in the icon but I would prefer not to make that attempt other than to observe that the Angel in the center is attired in blue over red, as in icons of Christ. All three figures appear to be deferring to each other, which is a demonstration of the perfect love the members of the Trinity have for each other and had for each other before the world was created.