

PAINTING ICONS AS PRAYER

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When the Patriarch Jacob awoke from his dream of the ladder with angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth, he declared: 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it' (Genesis 28:16). This exclamation by Jacob encapsulates the essence of prayer, and therefore also of icons: To meet God and His saints where we are, at this moment and in this place.

Such prayer can be gentle communion, more contemplation than speech, as it was for Jacob in his dream of the ladder in which he simply beholds and then worships. Or it can be to struggle with God, as when Jacob wrestles with the angel and will not let him go until blessed by him.

I have been an iconographer for over thirty years, and experience the act of painting icons as both these forms of prayer. Sometimes the process is contemplative, at other times it is a struggle. It is work, a form of asceticism. The act of painting icons is to pray with paint rather than words. It is to listen and discover as well as to express. It is to offer transformed matter in thanksgiving. It is akin to gardening, for the artist transforms creation's raw materials into an icon as into a garden.

In short, the work of iconography is a particular expression of the three ministries to which every person is called, be they lay or clergy: it is prophetic, priestly and royal. Or to express these three types of prayer another way: to receive and declare; to offer; to transform. I would therefore like to explore our topic of 'Icon Painting as Prayer' in the context of these three ministries.

Of course the main role of icons is to help us commune with and venerate the holy persons whom they depict. Icons are therefore often called a door between heaven and earth. But the theme we shall explore in this article is more to do with the process of painting an icon as a form of prayer than the icon's use in the liturgy - although, as we shall see, this process of icon making in the studio is in fact still part of the larger liturgical life of the Church, a little like the baking of bread at home for the Eucharist is in effect part of the Liturgy.

Let us begin with the prophetic element of icon painting.

1. ICON PAINTING'S PROPHETICAL ROLE

Prayer is communion, and therefore two-way. It is to listen as well as to speak, to see as well as to act. This is exemplified in the ministry of prophecy. A prophet is one who declares only what they have heard from God, describes only what they have seen from God. This is why a prophet is also called a seer, someone who sees.

¹ A talk given at the annual conference of 'The Friends of Athos', Madingley

It is largely for this reason that the Orthodox Church does not relegate the making of liturgical art to the individual artist's imagination. The Seventh Ecumenical Council declared: 'The making of icons does not depend upon the invention of painters, but expresses the approved legislation and tradition of the Catholic Church...The painter's domain is limited to his art, while the content and arrangement of the icons is prescribed by the Holy Fathers.'²

The iconographer's task is to make images of saints who exist, not to render figments of their imagination. Icons do not depict utopias or theories, but real persons. So icon painters must live the life of the Church so that they can come to know Christ and the saints personally and not merely as historical figures. In this sense, they seek to paint from life and not from models. They need to be seers before makers, hearers before painters.

This is graphically illustrated in the Exodus narrative concerning the Tent of Meeting and how it was made.

God revealed to Moses the pattern for the Tent of Meeting, because it had to reflect heavenly realities. The tent and all its furnishings were to be an icon or image of divine prototypes. So the overall schema had to come by divine revelation. Craftspeople were then needed to execute the plan, but they did not originate it. As we study the texts about the craftsman named Bezalel who was chosen to organize the construction the Tent of Meeting, we can see how he is a model for iconographers in the New Covenant. We read in Exodus:

[The Lord said to Moses] 'See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah,³ and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—⁴ to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze,⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.' (Exodus 31:2-5)

There is a subtlety here. While it is clear that Moses was the top prophet, and it was he who received from God the general schema for the tent of Meeting, Bezalel also had to be a kind of prophet. He of course needed to possess the skills in order to execute the God-given plans for the Tent of Meeting, but he also needed to be "filled with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding" so that he could understand the significance of the plans and translate Moses' verbal descriptions into wood, metal and cloth. Moses was given the general plan, but Bezalel had to design and construct the details. So he needed spiritual insight and discernment to ensure that these details remained true to the revelation given to Moses.

² The Seventh Ecumenical Council, Session Six. Translation by Kallistos Ware, 'The Theology of the Icon: A Short Anthology', *Eastern Churches Review* 8/1 (Spring 1976), 7.

We could therefore say that Moses represents the whole Tradition of the Church within which the iconographer operates, while Bezalel represents the community of iconographers who need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as well as technical skill in order to express the Tradition visually.

A personal journey

Bezalel means a lot to me personally. If I may, I would like to indulge in a little autobiographical detail, since it illustrates something of what I want to say about icon painting as prayer. For me, prayer and art have always been intertwined. They have been inseparable in my journey as a Christian.

I come from an artistic family, on both my mother's side and my father's, so I was very inspired by Bezalel when I first read about him at the age of fifteen. I had just become a Christian, and prayed fervently to the Lord that He might give me something of Bezalel's gifts so that I could serve Him artistically.

I think my eventually becoming Orthodox and an iconographer was an answer to that teenage prayer. I have even been blessed, like Bezalel, to serve the Church in a wide variety of mediums such as stone, wood, mosaic, metal and fresco, as well as in egg tempera.

But the journey has been long and convoluted, a sort of wrestling match with my angel. A few years within the Baptist communion after my conversion gave me a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, but of course little opportunity for art. This was followed by a move to a high Anglican parish, which affirmed the role of the material world in worship. After completing a degree in literature I became a professional sculptor at the age of twenty-one. My aim was to express the spiritual and material nature of the human person in clay and bronze. In retrospect, I think I was trying to depict saints. To this end I experimented with differing degrees of naturalism and abstraction. This artistic search was accompanied by an equally ardent desire to pray more deeply.

It was a quest that eventually led me to an Orthodox monastery, in New Zealand, the country in which I had been raised from the age of two. When I saw the icons at the monastery I immediately realized that this tradition had been doing for almost two millennia what I had been trying to do in my sculpture. All the conclusions that I had reached about how to suggest the spiritual nature of the human person in sculpture were there, plus of course a lot more besides. And the tradition of the Philokalia to which the monks introduced me convinced me that I had found the detailed ordnance survey map of the soul for which I had also been searching.

A word kept re-occurring in conversations with the monks: transfiguration. In this event Christ, and in Him our human nature and the whole material world, were revealed to be radiant with divine glory. This tallied with a formative experience that I had had ten years earlier and which had led to my becoming a believer in the first place. It was a vision of a person with radiant face, full of love, warmth and strength, accompanied by a community of other people. The frequent recollection of this Person full of light and love surrounded by His community had kept drawing me ever forward in my quest. It is what directed

my sculptural quest, and my search for deeper prayer. But here in the icon tradition, or rather, what it represented, was the answer: A tradition that depicted Christ and His saints, shining with the Holy Spirit in the kingdom of God.

Designing a festal icon: to hear and to speak

So what does this prophetic aspect of icon painting mean practically for an iconographer? How can mere pigment suggest inexpressible light and love? How, for example, might an iconographer approach the painting of a festal icon? Each icon painter has his or her particular approach, so I can only describe my own process.

The first stage for me is to see and hear the Word of the Lord in the tradition, so I immerse myself in the Orthodox liturgical texts for the feast and the appointed Biblical readings. Word and image go hand in hand in iconography, one interpreting the other, so they are inseparable. A study of contemporary and patristic commentaries is also helpful at this stage.

I then assemble numerous existing icons of the feast. Contrary to a popular misconception, there is considerable variety within the icon tradition. Different festal icons emphasise different truths about that sacred event.

The next stage is to analyse these icons and ascertain how they have interpreted the theology taught in the texts. This provides a toolkit of stylistic devices to use when finally designing the icon. There is also the basic matter of which persons are essential to the event and which are not – Nativity icons range from five to over twenty figures.

Then there is composition, how different icons arrange these figures and their background within geometric shapes to evoke the event's theology. In the illustrated icon of the Nativity, for example, the material world is contained within a square, while the heavenly realm is within a hemisphere atop this square (see figures 1 & 2). Representatives of all creation are arranged within a circle, whose centre is the child Jesus who, though a child, remains the creator, sustainer and Logos of the universe.

The direction of movement is also crucial. The illustrated icon of the Annunciation (fig. 3) directs our eye from the top left hand corner of the icon down through the angel's raised wing and on through his outstretched arm and fingers to Mary. God's word has come to her from heaven through the angel. But she also looks out at us and thereby engages us in the event, as though to say: 'Do you also wish to bear Christ?'

Having assembled from the tradition this vocabulary of stylistic devices, it is time to design the icon. The result is the outcome of various factors. The commissioner may want a particular theological emphasis, or may leave it up to the painter to decide. There is also the 'audience'. Is there a theme that is particularly suited to the commissioning community, or more generally, to its epoch and culture? Given the current importance of ecology, for example, I often try to bring out the Orthodox theology of matter and its vital role in our spiritual lives.

Then there is the icon's intended architectural home, with which the icon should ideally harmonize. I was recently commissioned to paint an icon of St Giles for St Gabriel's chapel in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral. Since the chapel has splendid Romanesque wall paintings I drew on works from this same period for inspiration. And more recently was commissioned to fresco a transfiguration scene for Lancaster University chaplaincy. The wall's orientation was an extended landscape rather than portrait, so this demanded an arrangement of figures that departed from the usual.

After the design comes of course the actual painting of the work, the final stage of the journey.

I have described this process perhaps a bit mechanically. In fact, most icon painters experience it as a struggle, a wrestle with the angel of truth until blessing comes. The great Rumanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi said that simplicity is complexity resolved. The process of making an icon is a struggle to distil the essentials from the complexity of written sources and then incarnate these in a single icon. Bezalel had to make a single Tent of Meeting from the lengthy descriptions given him by Moses, and this translation of word to image is of its nature a demanding work.

2. ICON PAINTING'S PRIESTLY ROLE

We turn now to the second aspect of icon painting, as priestly prayer. A priest is someone who offers thanks on behalf of others and is a sort of mouthpiece of worshippers to call down the grace of God. So in what ways can we call the act of painting icons a priestly act?

It needs first to be made clear that an icon is not a sacrament. It remains always wood and pigment. Even though there is a pious tradition of blessing icons, this blessing is not essential for an icon to become an icon. We venerate icons not because they have been transformed by a blessing to become something other than wood and paint, but because they bear the name and likeness of the holy persons whom they depict.

Nevertheless, there is a priestly element to icon painting in that the icon is an offering. It is an offering of artistically transformed matter as prayer. We don't offer raw wood and pigment, but wood and pigment fashioned into an icon.

Icon painting is a priestly act also in the sense that the icon invokes God's presence. It is a material declaration that the Lord is present. It is itself a form of epiclesis, only that it is the praying viewer who is transformed rather than the icon itself. The icon painter prays that through the icon the Lord will come to all those who behold it and pray before it. The Orthodox Church's 'Prayer before Painting an Icon' asks Christ to: 'Forgive our sins and the sins of those who will venerate these icons, and who, standing devoutly before them, give homage those they represent. Protect them from all evil and instruct them with good counsel.'

Many of us have seen roadside shrines in Christian countries, or icons in cars or buses. These icon shrines tell us that God is present in that place, and that it is a suitable time to worship Him. Icons can thus act like a church bell,

calling us to prayer at this moment. They are an epiclesis upon the present time and upon the present place.

Jacob's ladder

I would like to dwell a little on this theme of finding God in the here and now through a study of a triptych that I was commissioned to paint for Shrewsbury School chapel (see fig. 4).

The subject matter requested by the chaplain was unusual: Jacob's dream of the ladder to heaven (Gen. 28:10-22) and Jacob's wrestle with the angel (Gen. 32:22-31). As I researched for the icon I began to see that these events were all to do with meeting God in a specific place and in the present, and secondly, about union with Him, about deification. After the struggle the angel changed Jacob's name to Israel. He changes him from 'heel grabber' to 'one who struggles with God', from a name without God to a name mingled with God. For these reasons I asked the chaplain if we might combine the two icons of Jacob with an icon of the Transfiguration, and so make a triptych.

The account of Jacob's dream of the ladder tells us that Jacob came to 'a certain place' and 'stayed' – that is, at the time of the inspired dream he was still, he wasn't rushing around. He was, we might say, in a hesychastic state. As the account in Genesis tells us:

*Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹²He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.
(Genesis 28:11-13)*

When Jacob awakes he declares: 'Surely God is in this place; and I did not know it'. Now this place has become for Jacob a holy place, a place of divine presence, so he declares: 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'

Jacob then sets up as a pillar the very stone on which his head rested while he was having the dream, and pours oil on it. He calls the place Bethel, meaning God's house.

The important thing here - although perhaps Jacob doesn't realize it – is that it is not just the geographical place that has become holy but he himself has become the holy place, God's house. The dream occurred within himself, so he is the holy place. The ladder went into his soul. When he awakes and says, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God", it is in fact he himself who has become this awesome place. He has become a temple of God.

To become the temple of the Spirit is of course the whole aim of the monastic life, the hesychastic life, the Athonite life, and ultimately, the life of every

Christian. As I will discuss later, a major reason for the particular style of icon paintings is to help turn us, to repent and discover the Holy Spirit given to us at chrismation. It is not just by what the icon depicts but how it depicts its subject that the icon awakens us to the Holy Spirit's presence in our hearts and in the world.

One couldn't ask for a more graphic and succinct description of icons than Jacob's experience at Bethel. An icon is both a holy place where God is present, and also a gateway or ladder, a means of meeting those in heaven. It is not a sacrament, for an icon remains wood and pigment, but it is a holy topos, a place of encounter.

Jacob sees and experiences, and then offers a material reminder, the pillar. This is what it is to be an icon painter. It is to experience the Church as a ladder between and heaven, as the communion of the saints, and then to affirm this reality in icons. Icons are like the pillar that Jacob set up to remind himself and others that God is present, in this place and in the depicted saint. It is pertinent that Jacob's stone was not arbitrary, but was the very one on which his head lay when having the dream. It was therefore intimately connected with his divine encounter as a sort of witness. In a similar fashion an icon is a witness to and instrument of the iconographer's own encounter with God during its painting.

God provides specific places and specific object of holiness not in order to say that everything else is profane, but to help us treat everything and every place as holy, as a temenos. A holy object is not a pond but a spring. Blessing flows out from this little object and brings blessing far beyond its place and time. It is like the river in prophet Ezekiel's vision of the temple.³ This river began as a trickle from under the temple threshold, then flowed eastward until it became ankle deep, then knee deep, and onwards until it became 'a river that no man could cross.' The important thing is that wherever this river went it brought life. As Ezekiel wrote of the trees on the river's bank: 'Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing'.

This reminds me of an experience I had while frescoing Philip and Denise Sherrard's chapel at Evia in Greece. Denise wanted to reflect Philip's teaching on the role of the material world in the spiritual life, so we included trees between the standing saints. I used branches from local trees as models, but as is traditional, I tried to paint them not naturalistically but in their transformed, transfigured state, as bushes aflame with God's presence. This prolonged experience of painting trees within the chapel as paradisiacal trees helped me gradually to see and experience the trees outside the chapel in the same way. The specific led to the general. The borders of paradise expanded beyond the chapel walls.

Jacob wrestles with the angel

What of the second icon in our triptych, Jacob's wrestling match with the angel? The account in Genesis reads:

³ Ezekiel 47:1-12

*²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peni'el, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penu'el, limping because of his thigh.
(Genesis 32:23-31)*

Jacob struggles all night with a man, and will not let him go until he is blessed by him. Eventually the man blesses Jacob, and gives him a new name, Israel – which means, 'he struggles with God', or 'may God prevail'.

So Jacob's new name is a mixture of himself and God, while his old name denotes himself in competition with other humans, for Jacob means 'heel grabber'. Jacob is not content just to live in the world amidst other people, to be a heel grabber, but wants to live also with God. He struggles with God because He wants to be blessed by Him, to be united to Him. And this is not just a wish. It is a need. He will fight for this or die.

Though the man will not tell Jacob his own name, Jacob knows he has met God. In fact he names the place of encounter Peni'el (which means 'face of God'), saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.' The whole point is that Jacob is not content to know God as a concept, as a distant truth. He wants to know God here and now, in this place and this moment. And he will fight for it. This is prayer.

The Transfiguration Icon

To return to our triptych, between the two images of Jacob is the Transfiguration icon, but with a difference. I took the rather bold step of omitting Peter, James and John so that we viewers take their place. We are the participants in Christ's transfiguration. The Orthodox liturgical texts of feasts so often use the word today: 'Today Christ is transfigured upon Mount Tabor'. This is not mere poetic license, but a declaration that divine time (*kairos*) spills out from created time (*chronos*) and into the present. A divine event in history acts like a sacred place: it exists to make holy what is beyond it. So, just as the two images of Jacob are about encounter and communion with God wherever we are, so too is the Transfiguration icon.

But there is a difference. With Jacob, God stood above (or in some translations, beside) him, and could give him but a glimpse of interior union.

But in Christ, after Pentecost, God can dwell within us in a permanent union. In an inseparable marriage the Logos united in His divine person our human nature with His divine nature. This is why the fundamental defence for icons is the Incarnation. It is because God by grace has become flesh and blood that we can depict Him. Conversely, this is why we can depict saints, for they are beings of flesh and blood who have become gods by grace.

But we shall return to that great transfiguration event in the course of our talk, for it is fundamental to the icon tradition.

Icon painting as thanksgiving

Another aspect of our priestly role is to give thanks. To give thanks is to trace the gift back to its giver. Thanksgiving puts a face to a gift. It personalizes it. This is why icons never depict created things in isolation. Trees, rocks, and animals are all depicted in the context of Christ and His saints. The act of creating an icon is to give a voice to the inanimate matter from which it is made, a voice of thanksgiving. As St Leontius of Cyprus affirms: 'The creation does not venerate God directly by itself, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon worships God, through me the stars glorify him, through me the waters and showers of rain, the dew and all creation venerate God and give him glory.'⁴

An icon is a sort of microcosm, for it is made of representatives of all creation: pigments from the mineral kingdom; the wooden panel from the vegetable kingdom; egg that binds the pigments from the animal kingdom. Human skill and prayer transforms these God-given raw materials into something even more articulate in God's praise. Iconographers are like hymnographers, only they use colour and form to worship instead of musical notes.

The meaning of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the creation story has offered much material for theological exploration. For Saints Maximus the Confessor and Ephraim the Syrian it represented the material creation. For them, when we receive God's material creation as a revelation of His love it brings knowledge of good, and conversely, when grabbed for its pleasure and beauty it brings knowledge of evil. It is thus not the fruit itself (the created world) that is evil, but our thankless and consumerist interaction with it. If we use our power and authority to degrade creation rather than make it more articulate in God's praise, then the tree of creation becomes for us knowledge of evil. Our secularism and our environmental problems alone prove that God's warning is true.

For both Maximus and Ephraim the correct order was for Adam and Eve to be divinised first, through partaking of the tree of life. This life of grace would have freed them from passionate attachment to created things, and thus allowed them to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which is to 'see through created reality without danger, along with God'. As Maximus wrote:

⁴ St Leontius of Cyprus, *Apologetic Sermon 3, 'On the Holy Icons'* (Migne, PG, xciii, 1604AB). Cited by J. Chryssavgis in *Seeing God Everywhere: Essays on Nature and the Sacred*, ed. B. McDonald (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2004), 256.

*So God postponed the enjoyment of this tree, so that – as was right – man should first, by sharing in the life of grace, become aware of his own origin and should be confirmed in freedom from sensual drives and unwavering commitment by the gift of immortality and so come to share in the being of God through divinization; at that point, he could see through created reality without danger, along with God, and gain an understanding of it as a god, and not as a man. Through grace, and because of the divinizing transformation of his intellect and his senses, he would then have the same insight into the essences of things that God has: Wisdom.*⁵

According to St Ephraim the Syrian the asceticism of self-control should have preceded eating both fruits:

*[God] placed two crowns for Adam, for which he was to strive,
Two trees to provide crowns if he were victorious.
If only he could have conquered just for a moment,
He would have eaten the one and lived, eaten the other and
gained knowledge...*⁶

I would venture a second way of interpreting the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but one that I think is not contradictory to the above. In this interpretation to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the right way can be understood as the second stage of spiritual ascent as described by both Western and Eastern Fathers, and thus precedes eating from the tree of life. The first stage is purification (*praktiki theologia* in the Greek), in which we learn not to have a passionate attachment to created things. This leads to the second stage that they call illumination or natural theology (*physiki theologia*). In this second phase, purified of attachment to created things we see all things as a revelation of God's love and wisdom. The Greek Fathers tended to describe this second stage as the discernment of the *logos* or spiritual essence of each thing. Such a life of thanksgiving brings knowledge of good, whereas a life without discerning God in creation brings knowledge of evil.

This second stage of natural theology prepares man for the third stage, which is mystical theology, union with God, or eating of the tree of life. Thus the gifts lead us to the Giver. This threefold process teaches that matter, or rather our treatment of matter, was intended to be our preparation for deification.

The way an icon is painted encourages this perception of the logoi of created things, encourages us to trace all creation back to its Creator.

⁵ St Maximus the Confessor, in the Prologue of 'Quaestiones ad Thalassium'. Cited by Hans Urs von Balthasar in *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 181.

⁶ Ephraim the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, XII:17. Cited by S. Brock in *Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 167.

This leads us to the third role of the iconographer, and of all Christians: the call to be rulers and gardeners. In what ways did God intend us to use our power to rule in this world?

3. ICON PAINTING'S ROYAL ROLE

In the first chapter of Genesis we read that God blessed Adam and Eve and told them to 'be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1:28), and in the next chapter, to work Eden and take care of it (2:15). So our task is not only to give thanks, to be priests, but also to be rulers and gardeners, to tend the world and make it into a paradise, to help seeds become plants. We are priests, but also princes and princesses. Our authority in this world is given to nurture and raise it, not to degrade it.

We are called to be labouring royalty, to work as well as to rule. We are to rule from within our kingdom, to get dirty, and not to preside loftily as from a distant palace. Icon painting can be regarded as an expression in miniature of this calling to be princely gardeners or craftspeople.

Envision Eden to be in the midst of a fecund but wild forest. This God-planted garden is a synergy of the divine mind with the wild, puppy-like energy of the virgin forest that surrounds the garden. The garden bears the mark of its Designer and Planter even more clearly than the untrammelled forest beyond.

The divine gardener then places Adam and Eve in this paradise as in a microcosm, and charges them to continue His work of gardening. In creating Eden the Lord set an example for Adam and Eve, and told them to continue in the same vein, but in their own unique way. So when the Lord enjoins them to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth, He is asking them to make this whole wild world into a garden. Their authority over the world is to nurture and develop it, to raise it up and not to pollute or destroy it.

This is why it is only after the Lord has made Adam and Eve on the sixth day that He calls His work of creation very good, and not merely good as on previous days. I don't know about you, but I find forests wonderful but also somewhat oppressive after a while. I much prefer those great parks that mingle nature's fecund power with man's craft, where meadows, lakes and woodland are married with beautiful architecture, where pathways and fields allow you to walk side by side with friends and family.

This authority over creation that God has given us can be likened to the mastery that craftspeople and artists have over our materials. We seek to be masters of our materials in order to give them a voice, not to crush them. We want to make the good very good. But to rule we need first to listen to our subjects, to learn the characteristics of each material that we use, be it pigment, wood, or stone. Only in this way can an iconographer find the fitting place for each material within the symphony of praise that he or she is creating.

As with all liturgical life, I think of icons as a little paradise, as a microcosm and paradigm where all is in harmony. From this paradise others can be inspired to spread this harmony further into the wider world. An icon should

transform the way we see the world. As I said earlier, the icon is not a pond but a spring. It is a little paradise whose purpose is to inspire people to make their own lives a little paradise.

So I would like to finish by describing a little of the process of the final painting stage. In particular I want to consider how the icon tradition uses formal or stylistic means to help transform our vision of the world. The essence of this labour is, like a gardener, to nurture and make manifest the inner logoi of the events, people and objects that the icon depicts.

Transformation of the nous

I lived for a total of two years at Iviron monastery under Archimandrite Vasileios, and over six years as a hermit in the Stiperstone hills of Shropshire. One thing I learned from Father Vasileios's poetic and often enigmatic way of speaking and writing is that it is not just what is said that can transform the hearer but how it is said. I also had a number of meetings with Saint Paissius, and found that his humour, anecdotes and original images made his message more compelling and inspired you to see things in a different way.

By their particular style or form icons aim to do the same. They help us see the world as a burning bush and not just a bush, as a paradise aflame with God's glory and not merely as a conglomeration of atoms. Although only humans are in God's image and likeness, all things from stone to animal reflect God's glory according to their capacity. God created each tree, but He also keeps each tree in existence and actively loves through the gift of this tree. We are called to hear these words. Icons aim to make more clearly manifest to viewers the logoi of creation. And these logoi do not stand alone, as in a dictionary, but we gradually find that they form a poem of love, that the Logos Himself has written these words for us like a lover's note.

Each icon aims to be a stanza in this greater poem. Which is why everything must be arranged harmoniously within the frame, called the kivotos. Nothing is arbitrarily cut off.

This is also why sometimes we see gold lines - called assist - on a tree or even on furniture as well as on Christ's garments. The icon never depicts matter as mere matter, but matter transfigured, matter transparent to the divine.

The whole basis of the icon is the incarnation: 'God is with us!' Each icon is an extension of what happened two thousand years ago in the Holy Land. The icon helps me to find God here, now, be it as a family man, with children, or as a monk in a cave on Mount Athos. A festal icon depicts an event that happened in historical time - or *chronos* as it is called in Greek - but also shows us how divine time - *kairos* - is acting through the event and flowing forwards and backwards. The Pentecost icon shows St Paul present, for example, even though it was some years before his conversion.

So prayer is a journey, but not a journey away from ourselves but a journey to where we are. This is hesychasm. To be where we are and to be there with God. As T. S. Eliot wrote in 'Little Gidding', the last of his 'Four Quartets':

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

This need to turn and find God close, where we are, in part explains the strange systems of perspective that icons use. Inverse perspective turns things around, so that we the viewers become the vanishing point. The icon depicts the world as seen by God. It shows us contemplated by God and His saints.

Multi-view perspective shows a building viewed from numerous places at once, and thus depicts it as God sees it, unbounded by place. This multi-view perspective also relates to how we inwardly know something to be, rather than as it appears to the retina. Even though we see only three sides of the box at a time, we know there are others, and so the icon depicts some of the others as well.

Hills and mountains express the spiritual dynamics of sacred events. The rocks in the Resurrection icon part like the jaws of Hades, and the mountain of Christ's Nativity icon stretches upwards towards heaven, earnestly desiring the incarnation and opening its heart to receive the baby within its cave.

The faces of the saints show a bright sadness. They are full of joy, but also full of compassion for our struggles here on earth. There are no excessive movements or expressions, because the saints want to help us find inner quiet, find that inner treasury of which St Isaac the Syria speaks so eloquently:

Be peaceful within yourself, and heaven and earth will be at peace with you. Be diligent to enter into the treasury that is within you, and you will see the treasury of Heaven: for these are one and the same, and with one entry you will behold them both. The ladder of the Kingdom is within you, hidden in your soul. Plunge deeply within yourself, away from sin, and there you will find steps by which you will be able to ascend.⁷

When I sit before the white gesso of an icon panel, I am aware that a journey is about to begin. And I know from experience that it is not going to be an easy journey. My impossible task is to imprint as on wax the image of a living saint. The saint exists, but is invisible to my physical eyes. The icon is to be an image or likeness of the saint, and will bear their name. And so it needs to reflect something of their character: their gentleness, wisdom, inner prayer, compassion. And often the saint or subjects are set within a scene, such as in festal icons, so we need to show that scene also in a Christ-centred way.

⁷ St Isaac the Syrian, from the Second Homily in *The Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), 11.

There is of course the whole icon tradition to help with this task. But unless one considers icon painting to be a sort of glorified scan-and-print process, the iconographer needs to know their subject personally. I need to paint the saint from life, seen and known through the eye of the spirit. The icon tradition is not an excuse for lazy and mindless copying.

CONCLUSION

So prayer, both private and liturgical, must be at the heart of an icon painter's life. He or she is called to bear witness, for a witness is someone who has seen for themselves. But how? The believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and prayer, repentance and love is the path to their inner sanctuary where they can meet the Spirit. It is there, at the altar of the heart, that they will meet Christ, the saints, the angels. Before an icon painter can rule over their paint they need to rule over themselves, to be master of their faculties and passions. As St Isaac wrote in the passage quoted above: Plunge deeply within yourself, away from sin'.

But for an iconographer only to see and know is not enough, for their ministry is also to testify in paint to what they have seen and known. Their ministry, like a composer of hymns, demands skill and craft to express this knowledge to others. Like the disciples who saw the uncreated light of the transfigured Lord but then descended again to daily life, the icon painter needs to return to the world to articulate this vision in material pigment.

And this vision is neither of pure spirit nor of pure matter, but of matter imbued with spirit, of creation transfigured by its Creator, of humans become god by grace because God has become human out of love for us. Gregory Palamas asserts that it is not man's *nous* itself that is in God's image, but the embodied *nous*⁸. The icon as used in prayer is a graphic expression of this principle.

And this vision is a communal vision. It is not just of the person Jesus Christ whom we depict, but also of His family: Moses, Elijah, all the Old Testament righteous, all the saints of the New Covenant, and the angelic host for good measure.

This rhythm of inner and outer, spirit and matter, mountain top experience followed by labour on the plains, is of course common to every one of us. All I have described today about the specific challenges facing the iconographer is but a graphic illustration of the calling facing every Christian, be they cleric, monk or lay. May the Lord help us to complete each of our pilgrimages!

NOTE ON THE CONTRIBUTOR

Aidan Hart has been a professional iconographer for over thirty years. He also founded and teaches the Certificate in Icon Painting for the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, and is a Fellow of the Temenos Academy. Publications

⁸ James Blackstone, *Knowledge and Experience in the Theology of Gregory Palamas* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 81.

include “Techniques of Icon and Wall Painting” (Gracewing, 2011, 2015) and “Beauty Spirit Matter” (Gracewing, 2014). Though primarily a maker of icons, in his writings and research he also explores the implications of the icon’s theology for ecology, the nature of the human person and art.

CAPTIONS

Fig. 1. The Nativity of Christ. Private collection. (By the author).

Fig. 2. The geometrical structure that underlies the illustrated Nativity icon.

Fig. 3. The Annunciation. Private collection. (By the author).

Fig. 4. Triptych: Jacob wrestles with the angel; the Transfiguration; Jacob’s dream of the ladder. Shrewsbury School chapel. (By the author).