

**FROM GLORY TO GLORY:
ICONS AS ENCOUNTER WITH THE FACE OF BEAUTY¹
Aidan Hart**

Our subject title today is 'From Glory to Glory: Icons as encounter with the face of beauty'. This afternoon I want us look at the world view behind the icon tradition that you see represented in the icons around us in this exhibition. The abstract style of icons suggests a particular way of seeing the world, a different view from, say, a Renaissance painter's. Without some insight into the vision behind icons they will remain obscure for us. We might even judge them crude, the result of ignorance.

We can conveniently consider the meaning of icons under three headings: personhood, community and transformation.

PERSONHOOD

In this great city of London we see hundreds of people a day, millions of faces in our lifetime. In this superabundance it is all too easy to forget how remarkable the human person is, how beautiful and noble in faculties God has made us. When I am granted a glimpse of this miracle of the human person, I feel that I am standing in the midst of gods.

So, what are we? God himself declares through the Psalmist: 'You are gods, all of you, sons of the Most High' (Psalm 82:6). If we saw how truly remarkable each person is, we would bow down to honour everyone we met. Each person is a living icon of God, called to draw into ever deeper union with the Creator, to pass from glory to glory and to be a bearer of the Holy Spirit and a living temple. One of the functions of icons such as those that we see here today is to reveal a little of this magnificence of humans fully alive, who have fulfilled their potential and become bearers of the Holy Spirit—that is, the saints.

I love the story of Moses and the burning bush. He is going about his business tending his herd, and he sees a bush that is burning without being consumed. He draws near to see what this strange sight is. God speaks to him and he bows down.

The Fathers of the Orthodox Church tell us that this bush is a type or image of the Virgin Mary, for she bore God without being consumed by the fire of His divinity. But it is also a type of every saint, and therefore also, to the extent of their purity, of every person. Every person to a greater or lesser extent is such a burning bush, if only we could see it. Why do I say this? Because, whether or not they believe it, each person is a living image of God. Every person and everything in creation is sustained and kept in existence only because God keeps it in existence. As the Scriptures tell us: 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by the word of his power' (Heb. 1:3). God not only creates but sustains things. No bush or person exists without this 'fire' of divine grace keeping it in existence. In God we 'live and move and have their being', to quote St Paul, who himself is quoting the sixth-century BC Greek philosopher Epimenides of Knossos.

So it was not so much the bush that changed and began to burn, but Moses who changed. God opened his eyes to see creation as it always is: aflame with the creator's glory. It is the same with Christ's transfiguration when Peter, James and John see Him shining brighter than the sun. An Orthodox hymn for the feast tells as that:

¹ A talk given 15 May 2022, at All Saints West Dulwich, London.

Christ was transfigured before them, making manifest the majesty of His original beauty, though not in its full perfection, for while giving them full assurance He also spared them, lest at the sight they should lose their lives; yet they beheld as much as their bodily eyes were able to receive. (Lity of Great Vespers)

Indeed, all things, animate and inanimate, bear this flame to the extent that their nature allows: a tree more than a stone; an animal more than a tree; a human more than an animal. Nothing exists of itself, but only because God keeps it in existence and dwells in it and it dwells in Him. Christians are not pantheists, but they are pan-entheists: they do not believe that everything is God, but they do believe that God is in everything.

But, you are doubtless thinking, are there not evil people, indifferent people, people who care for nothing other than pleasure and wealth and power? How can we say that they are in God's image? The tradition of the Orthodox Church explains this dilemma by distinguishing between image and likeness. In the book of Genesis we read that God made mankind 'in His image (*eikona* in the Greek Septuagint) and likeness (*omoiosin*)' (Gen 1:26). The Fathers say that all people, regardless of their faith or moral condition, are made in God's image. But they also say that because an important part of this divine imageness is freedom, each individual can use this freedom to direct their gaze either toward the beauty of the One who made them, or away from Him. This leads us to the second term in our phrase from Genesis: Image and *likeness*. The extent of a person's *likeness* to God depends on how they use or misuse their divinely given freedom. This is why the Russian word for saint means 'much like' (*prepodobny*). The saints grew into God's likeness because they continually strove to direct their gaze towards God. To paraphrase the words of St Paul, with unveiled faces they contemplated the Lord's glory, and so were transformed into His image, passing from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18).

To summarise what we have just said: God is beauty Himself, and people are beautiful and profound to the degree that they participate in His divine beauty.

The important thing here is that participation in divine beauty is personal. It is not mere aesthetic delectation. It is a relationship—albeit an unequal one—between God and human persons. The last book of the Bible uses the image of marriage to describe the culmination of human history:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Marriage presumes proximity, intimacy. And as we shall see, icons are a means of more intimately experiencing God, His angels and our fellow brethren the saints. A church full of icons or frescos is a foretaste and promise of the union to be accomplished in the New Jerusalem. As the verse above goes on to say:

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.' (Rev 21:2,3)

When you enter a church fully frescoed, you feel indeed that you are in the fellowship of the saints and angels, and that God is in your midst.

You will notice that with most icons the people they depict are looking at us. This is because the ultimate purpose of an icon is to draw us into relationship. Why is this important? Because to be a person is to be in relationship. In both Greek and Latin the word

for person—*prosopon* and *persona*—also means face, and a face exists for relationship.² Through our mouths we communicate with others using speech; through our ears we listen to others; through our eyes we see others.

The proto-icon is the icon of Christ. He is the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who has become human without in any way diminishing His divinity. St Paul wrote of ‘the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6). It is only because the invisible God has become flesh and therefore visible that we have icons. It is why images of God and even of people were prohibited in the Old Testament. God had not yet become flesh and therefore visible in Christ, and so any attempt to make an image of God would have been the invention of human imagination and thus a false image. But now, the God the Father has revealed Himself in the face of Christ. His Son has become flesh and therefore visible and depictable.

The purpose of God’s union with human nature is that we might enter more intimate relationship with God, not just to obey Him like a slave to a master, but to become sons and daughters, participants in the divine nature. It is in the person of Christ that the created and uncreated ‘overlap’, and it is therefore in Him that we creatures can participate in His uncreated glory.

We notice various abstractions in the way icons depict the face, and these tell us something about what it is to be a fully alive person. The organs of reception are enlarged or elongated: the eyes and ears enlarged, and the nose elongated. The organs of reception like the lips are by contrast made a little smaller, and gestures are not agitated but restrained. Why? Because the saint is above all someone who thirsts for God: he or she contemplates His beauty, listens to His beloved voice, smells the fragrance of paradise. This in turn fills them with divine power and wisdom, and this makes their actions and words potent. A few words or a small action from them can have a remarkable effect because it is God acting through the saint.

Icons are not just to be contemplated. They are a door to the holy persons whom they depict, and like doors they are there to be used and not just looked at. In the Orthodox Church, when we enter a church we cross ourselves. We are entering the presence of the holy. We then go to the icon of the day’s commemoration or the patronal icon and cross ourselves, bow down twice, kiss the icon and bow down again. This kissing is called veneration. We worship God alone, but we delight in venerating all people and things through whom God reveals Himself. I venerate all of you here today, because you are living icons of God.

As we have discussed, to a lesser extent we can venerate all of creation to the degree that it reveals God’s love to us. St John of Damascus, a great defender of icons against the iconoclasts, wrote:

I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works for my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God.

I would suggest that the secular world’s loss of this ‘iconicity’ of all creation is the root cause of our ecological crisis. It is when we forget that creation is a gift and expression of divine love to us that we feel free to plunder it, treating it as though it were a bank full of infinite funds to be withdrawn at will.

² These words originally meant the masks that actors wore, and which described and amplified the character that their wearers played. The aim of these masks was not therefore to conceal but to reveal.

Actions follow vision. If a person or culture views creation as a gift then they will honour it and care for it, living in a state of thanksgiving and awe. They will become eucharistic creatures.

If on the other hand a person views the world just as mere 'nature' and not the creation of the Personal God—albeit perhaps viewing it as beautiful in itself—then their actions will de-personalise it, desecrate it. The beauty of the world will become for them a mask and not a revelation of the personal God. It will become just an intricate web of molecules, as the atheistic Richard Dawkins would have us believe.

The book of Genesis tells us that God planted this remarkable paradise that we call earth and then placed us in it. As those of you who are gardeners will know, a garden or park expresses the character of its designer. It is a work of art. God gave this Eden to us in part for food, but also as an expression of His love for us. It is a wedding gift from the Bridegroom to His bride.³ It is a place where He can walk with us and where we can enjoy His company.

This role of the world as a setting for communion is implied in the very word Paradise. It is a Persian word and denotes an enclosed royal park. It is where the Persian king would enjoy the company of his family and friends. Although a stone, tree or animal is not personal in itself, it is a revelation of the personal love of the Creator for his people. The cosmos is created to complement and manifest our Bridegroom's love for us; it is a pre-nuptial gift.

The paradisaical function of creation explains why the icon tradition depicts animals, plants and mountains within the context of Christ and His people. They are not used as mere decoration or space fillers. Taken as a whole, icons and church decorations such as frescos and mosaics denote a peopled garden, a garden that is a setting for living relationship. They are part of that loving relationship, just as a home is for the family living in it.

This leads us to our second theme: community.

Community

Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness... male and female he created them' (cf Gen 1:26,27).

'Let us.' Although in the Hebrew this plural case is just a grammatical technique, Church Fathers have taken this to be an adumbration of the Holy Trinity: God said (singular), let us make (plural). For us to be in God's image and likeness is therefore to be in community. God Himself is not a monad but a divine community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each fully God, and yet there is but a single divine nature. Each divine Person is a distinct *hypostasis*, as the Greek Fathers denote their distinctiveness. The Father is not the Son and the Holy Spirit is not the Son or the Father, and yet they are all one in nature.

This unity in distinction means that the icons on the walls around us need to be seen not just as individual images of individual people, but as a whole, as a single heavenly choir, as a commonwealth of citizens. My brother and my sister are my means of communion with God. They are the other part of what it means for me to be in the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity.

In contrast to this communal understanding of personhood, the existentialist philosopher Paul Sartre believed that the gaze of other people limits us, imprisons us within their perceptions. As he wrote in the close of his play 'No Exit':

³ In using such terms as walk and plant we are of course using metaphors, for God does not need to walk like we do. But such images from the Genesis account are nevertheless profoundly true on a deeper level.

All those eyes intent on me. Devouring me. What? Only two of you? I thought there were more; many more. So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the 'burning marl.' Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot poker. HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE!

By contrast, the saintly elder Arsenius said that when a poor person reaches out to us he does not beg but offers us the kingdom of God. The authenticity of each person's relationship with God above is measured by the authenticity of their relationship with their neighbour. Each person will be judged not by how many prayers they have prayed, but whether or not they have visited Christ in prison, given Him water when He was thirsty and fed Him when hungry.

It is perhaps with wall paintings or mosaics that the icon tradition most clearly represents the communal nature of this life to which we are called. On entering a church covered in frescos or mosaics we are given a lively sense that it is not us who begin a church service, but that we simply join in the ceaseless heavenly worship. We see Christ in the dome, the prophets and patriarchs in the drum, the evangelists in the squinches, the martyrs and recent saints on the wall of the nave, the Mother of God in the apse. Past and future are gathered into the present, heaven and earth join hands.

Frescos and mosaics usually include depictions not just of humans but also vegetation and animals, mountains and geometrical shapes. All these are painted in such a way as to participate in the heavenly choir. The plants are verdant but orderly, the animals playful but move according to the liturgical choreography. They are like improvisations within a jazz work. Even the inclination and rhythm of hills follow the spiritual dynamics of the sacred events for which they offer a backdrop.

Light is also included in this sacred liturgical dance. Oil lamps and candles provide a gentle light, one that focuses on the faces of the icons. At high points of all-night vigils on Mount Athos the chandelier and the choros are swung to denote the stars dancing in praise of God. The skilful placement of windows admit natural light at the right time and to the right place.

In quite a real sense, creation needs mankind for it to become fully articulate in praise of God. Or to be more accurate, while all creation can praise God by itself, it needs the human person to thank God on its behalf. We are creation's eucharistic voice. As St Leontios of Jerusalem boldly declares in a sermon:

Through heaven and earth and sea, through all creation visible and invisible, I offer veneration to the creator of all things. For 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. (Apologetic Sermon, 3, 'On the Holy Icons')

There is a story of a hermit, Brother Bruno. He is trying to pray in silence but the loud croaking of the frogs, the buzzing of flies and the call of the herons distract him. So he recites the Psalms aloud. But still the racket outside distracts him. So he commands all the creatures to be silent so that he can concentrate on his prayers. He is a saint and so they all obey him out of respect and fall silent. He now has his quiet, but as he resumes his prayers a still small voice says in his heart: 'And what if God derived greater pleasure from the croaking of the frogs than the chanting of your psalms?' He walks to the window and blesses his fellow creatures to resume their praise. Immediately he is granted prayer of the heart. From that

time on Brother Bruno found that what used to be a distraction became instead a call to prayer.

We come now to our final theme of Transfiguration. The event of Christ's Transfiguration is such a rich seam to mine that I want today to concentrate on just one of its themes: the potential of inanimate matter to mingle with divine glory, and the implications of this for artistic activity.

Transfiguration

It is sometimes said that by tradition the first icon an iconographer paints on completing their training is the Transfiguration of Christ. I do not know the origin of this assertion, but it is certainly a good idea! This is because Christ's Transfiguration and its icon contain all the truths that are fundamental to the icon tradition. It affirms the truths we have just discussed, namely, that:

- Christ is God made flesh, for we see a man of flesh and blood shining with divine light, and hear the voice of the Father saying: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, listen to him'.
- God's intention for each person is to become a 'partaker in the divine nature', to be deified or filled with the Holy Spirit in a union without confusion. The transfiguration therefore shows us not only that Christ is God but also what it is to be fully human.
- Communion with God is inseparable from communion with others, for the three disciples are together when they behold Christ, and Christ himself is transfigured in the presence of Moses and Elijah, Moses representing the dead, and Elijah, who did not die but was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot, represents the living.

Christ's transfiguration affirms also a fourth truth, namely, the capacity of the inanimate material world to be transfigured. The Gospel writers tell us that not only did Christ's face shine but also His garments. This confirms that the material world can participate in this divine glory that Orthodox theology sometimes calls uncreated light. Inanimate garments, the work of human craft, are capable of partaking in and being a vehicle of divine glory.

So let us look in more detail at this remarkable fact. The Greek word for all creation is *cosmos*, a word which also means adornment (whence our English words like cosmetic). So when we read that Christ's garments were transfigured, we can read the cosmos was transfigured. This event on Mount Tabor was a foretaste of the transfiguration of the whole cosmos. Indeed, St Paul writes that

the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. (Rom 8:21)

There are three elements to this transfiguration of Christ's garments.

First, this garment is a product of human craft, the transforming God-given 'raw materials' into a garment. It is the fruit of a synergy of man and matter. In a similar way, we do not offer grapes and wheat at the Eucharist, but wine and bread. These are the result of human endeavour acting upon the God-given materials of grape and wheat. The making of an icon is another such craft: the pigments are from the mineral kingdom, the wooden panel from the vegetable kingdom, the egg that binds the pigments are from the animal kingdom. All these are transformed into an icon by a human person to become a bearer of God's grace, a

tabernacle. The icon is not a sacrament, for it remains always paint and wood, but it is a grace-bearer. It is connected to the holy person depicted because it bears their image.

Second, this garment is worn by Christ. As an adornment it is personalised by association with its wearer. It is no longer mere matter, but an expression and extension of the person wearing it. The cosmos is not just a fact, but is potential, just as a garment hanging in a wardrobe is potential. Through the sacramental life of the Church the cosmos is destined to become adornment for the Body of Christ. A forest becomes a paradise park. This is why the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a garden city, the New Jerusalem.

The cosmos is created to be a temple within which God is worshipped and adored by His people. It is precisely because of this association with the person of Christ that this garment, and by extension, the cosmos, can be transfigured.

This leads us to our third point, that the garment remains garment but at the same time becomes something it was not. It is no longer mere matter, but matter shining with divine glory. It becomes like a stained-glass window animated by the light that passes through it, to make its colours glow to their full potential. It becomes a union of created and uncreated, of matter and light. Matter does not dissolve, but it permeated by light, just as a clear sapphire remains sapphire but is animated by light passing through it.

One Jewish tradition, taken up by certain Church Fathers such as St Ephraim the Syrian, tells us that before Adam and Eve sinned they were clothed with this divine light. It was only when they declared their independence from God that they lost their garment of light and saw that they were naked:

It is because of the glory with which they were clothed that they were not ashamed. When it was taken away from them—after they had violated the commandment—they were indeed ashamed, because they were now naked (Ephraim the Syrian, Commentary on Genesis, 2:14).

To be transfigured is man's natural supernatural state. This is why icons of saints have haloes, and why we see no shadows, for the saints have become all light.

Through mankind's fall, the plants and creatures in paradise lost the radiance they had. The garments of skin that God subsequently gave them, skins made from dead animals, represent this opacity resulting from the fall.

But Christ took on this flesh of the fallen world, united it to His divine nature, and thereby filled it again with light. As a hymn of the feasts declares:

*Today upon Mount Tabor
Christ hath changed the darkened nature of Adam, filling it with the
brightness of divinity. (Aposticha, Small Vespers)*

And again:

*The sun which fills the world with light now sets again;
But Christ hath shone as lightning with glory upon the mountain, filling the
whole world with light. (Aposticha, Small Vespers)*

The creation account given in Genesis tells us that it was only after God made Adam that He declared His creation to be very good; previous days He had declared that it was merely good. This is because creation, as beautiful as it is in itself, only finds its ultimate fulfilment through man's agency, though whom it can be transfigured. Through our loving care for

creation and our priestly ministry of thanksgiving the world becomes a cosmos, a garment for the body of Christ. According to the Genesis account of paradise, 'the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it' (Gen 2:15).

The divine plan was for man and woman to interact with creation, to work it and to care for it. But this was not just to develop it on the horizontal plane, to extend the paradisaical garden into the whole world. This cultivation was also intended to work on the vertical plane, to raise the material it to a higher and transfigured level. In other words, we were intended to be the prophets, priests and kings of creation, called to hear God in creation, to offer it in thanksgiving, and to transform it like royal artists.

This suggests one possible role of art in general, as distinct from the liturgical art of icons. Much great art, such as that of Vermeer, Van Gogh, the Impressionists and Matisse, gives us a hint of this union of light and matter. Even when the painter is not particularly religious and is interested only the interaction of created light and matter, they inadvertently reflect something of this spiritual transfiguration. The high key colours of Monet's lily pond evoke the brilliant jewels described in St John's vision of the New Jerusalem.

Other artists express a similar aim but more in relation to form rather than to colour. This was the case with the founder of modern abstract sculpture, the Rumanian Constantin Brancusi. Compare, for example, this text from the seventh century saint, Maximus the Confessor, with the aphorism from Brancusi that follows it:

Do not stop short of the outward appearance which visible things present to the senses, but seek with your intellect to contemplate their inner essences (logoi), seeing them as images of spiritual realities... (St Maximus the Confessor)

And Brancusi's words:

They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.

Conclusion

Since actions follow our vision, if our vision of the happy life is mere physical abundance we will become fleshly consumers in pursuit of this vision. If our vision is of union with God, then we will live a life of thanksgiving. We will behold God hidden under every rock and within all those people whom we meet.

This is why the images that we have on the east walls of churches are so important. We face east when worshipping because we journey forwards in expectation of Christ our Bridegroom's return and the coming of the New Jerusalem. What we see painted on the east wall of a church should represent the vision of what we work and walk towards.

We will certainly still interact with the world around us, tilling and working it, but we will do this in a radically different way from the carnal consumer because of the direction and intention of our labours. We will not merely use the earth to take from it what we want, treating it as though it mere dead matter, but we will honour and venerate it as gift and revelation. We will contemplate God in His creation just as much as we work and transform it.

Brancusi asserts that such contemplative labour requires humility. He said that in every work of the spirit

*the vain ego of the person ought to be dissolved. The hidden principle - that is, the truth - can only be revealed if the ego is entirely eliminated.*⁴

At another time he said:

*People do not get along with each other because they arrange their communal existence on the basis of a fatal pyramid. They all try to reach the top, relentlessly pushing each other aside when it would be more natural to live like flowers in a field, each one finding its own spot and being provided with rain, sunshine, the freshness of a cool breeze, the blessing of the sky, and the violence of storms.*⁵

The icon tradition helps orient our vision towards this high calling. Liturgical beauty arouses nostalgia for our lost homeland of paradise. 'Without vision the people perish', says the book of Proverbs (Prov. 29:18). I fear that for too long we in Britain have thought that churches are best with white walls, that we need to clear out everything material to give us clear, direct and uncluttered access to God. 'Since God is Spirit, matter has no place in our relationship with Him', our barren churches tell us.

This attitude towards matter borders on heresy, for God made us material beings, and God Himself did not consider it belittling to become flesh and blood. If Christians want to live according to God's exalted vision and not the secular world's petty vision, then there is no better place to begin than its own church art. Churches and the liturgical art within them should be a little paradise, where God, man and matter are in perfect union, a world in which matter is shown in its transfigured state, where God walks with His people in paradise.

⁴ Calinic Argatu *'Peace and Rejoicing' with Brancusi* (Bucharest, 2001) p. 12.

⁵ Calinic Argatu *'Peace and Rejoicing' with Brancusi* (Bucharest, 2001) p. 11