

ICONS IN THE MODERN WORLD: A new way of seeing¹

(1.) Vision

Our subject today is *Icons in the Modern World: A New Way of Seeing*. I chose this title because individuals and cultures live on this earth according to how they see the world; actions naturally follow upon vision. Follow the footprints of destructive actions and they will lead you to the human heart and its distorted vision of what it thinks the world should be like. As Christ said:

What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come. (Mark 7:20)

Follow the actions of a saint on the other hand, and they will lead you to a heart full of the sort of things we see in icons. If I see the world as something to be colonised by my ego and a means of extending my power, then war will follow. If, on the other hand, I see all people as icons of God, made in his image, then I will treat them with profound respect and seek out all that is good in them. If I see the material world as a bank of endless cash to be plundered for my pleasure, then ecological disaster will follow. If, on the other hand, I see the material world as an expression of God's love, then I will venerate and cherish it.

The icon tradition shows a world seen through the eye of the purified heart. It therefore sees the world not just as an object, but as a locus of God's presence and activity. The tradition of iconography manifests a radical way of seeing material creation, as an expression of divine love and transfigured by God incarnate.

So in our talk today we shall explore in more detail what vision of the world the icon opens to us, and how it does this. We will see that this vision is expressed not just in the icon's subject matter, but in how it depicts this subject matter. Content and form unite.

Countless stories in the Bible, and also in the world's mythologies, speak of people entering a new and higher world through something small and something material — a cave, door, a ring, a touch. The list is almost endless. So it is with panel icons: they are small and just paint on wood, but if seen and used as intended, they are a passage to a new and profound place. They are a door. They are a means of initiation into a new way of seeing the world. I often tell my new icon students that learning to paint icons is a dangerous business; it will change their lives!

Icons in context

¹ A talk given for the Russian Museum of Icons, Clinton, Massachusetts, 5 March, 2022.

Before proceeding to look at individual icons and mosaics, it is important to remember that these are made to be part of a larger activity. An icon is not merely an isolated object for you or I to look at as isolated individuals. They are made to be part of a sacred and communal drama that is called liturgy. (2) The purpose of this drama is the communal worship of God, to enter union with God, and to grow in love of all those people and the whole material world that God has created.

We could say that the icon is like scenery in a play, just one element of a rich and complex activity involving many people and things, only this is a real-life drama and not entertainment. Although it is wonderful that we can readily view icons in museums and galleries such as the Museum of Russian Icons, we must remember that the icon's native home is in a church, in the homes of people who pray in front of them, in roadside shrines, to be processed and venerated. (3) This functionality is why old icons show marks of damage, such as burn marks from candles, worn off paint where they are kissed, chipped corners from countless processions. Icons are literally loved to bits.

Today I wish to explore with you three themes: the means that icons use to transform how we see matter, personhood and time. We will do this by focusing on the icon of the Christ's transfiguration.

1. The transformation of matter

By tradition (though perhaps rarely done in reality), once a person has completed their training, the first icon they paint is Christ's transfiguration. (4) I think this is because Christ's transfiguration affirms so many things, which is why we shall focus on this icon today. To begin, let us dwell on what Christ's transfiguration reveals to us about the material world, how God's incarnation in Christ has transformed the material world and how we see that material world.

Three accounts are given in the Gospels, in Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36. The beginning of Matthew's account reads as follows:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. (Matthew 17:1-3)

Christ's face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. His face was flesh, and yet it shone with light. His clothes were just inanimate plant material – probably linen, and yet they too shone with this light.

All this is depicted in the icon: Christ stands in shining white garments with a nimbus of light shining from him. He is flanked by Elijah on the left and Moses on our right, and below them, Peter, John and James fall down in various states of disarray, overawed by the vision.

What was this light? The fathers of the Church, and all who walk in the Holy Spirit, know that this light is none other than the dazzling splendour of God's glory. It is God himself, revealed as light – not mere created light, but uncreated divine light. If we may speak thus: God is the true Sun, and this light shining through Christ's flesh and garments are rays coming from the Sun. In other words, just as the sun's rays that we feel and see on earth are sun, so this light of transfiguration is God himself as he comes to us. This light is not some created reality, separate from God.

(5) On the other hand, we note something unusual about the aureole of light that surrounds Christ in the icon. It is dark blue close to Christ and lighter further away from him, although he is its source. This is the reverse of what you would expect with created light.

This reverse colour system hints at a profound truth: God as he is in himself and in his essence remains forever unknowable to us, and thus to us, he appears as 'dark' in his essence. This is what is indicated when the Israelites saw on Mount Sinai a combination of a dark cloud and lightening, of darkness and light:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain. (Ex. 19:16).

The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. (Ex 20:21)

So God is unknowable in his essence, as he is in himself, but he is equally knowable by us through the light and life and grace that comes from Him, since this light is him and is not created. Thus, God is both beyond and within creation. Christians are not pantheists, but they are pan-entheists. They believe that God is in everything. The fourteenth century saint, Gregory of Palamas (c. 1296-c. 1357) wrote:

God is in the universe and the universe is within God.... Thus all things participate in God's sustaining energy, but not in His essence. (St Gregory Palamas, in the Philokalia, Vol. 4, p. 393.)

This leads to an important distinction worship and veneration. If you go to an Orthodox church service you will see people kissing icons. They are venerating those saints and all things through which God comes to them. They worship only God himself, but love of God leads to veneration of all he has made.

What I want us to dwell on here is that at Christ's transfiguration his divine glory comes to us through matter, through his body and through his garments. *His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.* God's glory does not by-pass flesh and matter, as though matter were an irrelevance (or even evil, as the Gnostic heresy taught), but it comes to us through it.

And this material stuff is not simply a conduit for the divine light. It is itself transformed by that light. God's glory mingles with it, transfigures it. Just as iron mingles with heat when left in a fire and glows, so is matter united with divinity in a union without confusion. Divinity and matter retain their distinction, just as iron returns to iron when removed from the fire, but as long as they remain together they are united as though one.

One of the tasks of an icon painter is to suggest this luminosity of creation. We try to make at least some of the paint layers translucent, so that some light can pass through them, strike the white gesso ground, and then re-emerge as transmitted light as though coming from within the icon.

(6) This union of creator and creation is possible because of the incarnation, because God the Logos has become flesh. The icon of Christ is therefore the mother of all icons. Since God is now eternally united to our flesh through Christ, creation and creator are eternally united in a union without confusion. This enfleshment of God was the main theological defence of icons put forward by St. John of Damascus and St. Theodore the Studite against the iconoclasts in the eighth and ninth centuries. God has become flesh and therefore visible and therefore also depictable.

Eastern Church Fathers give various names and identify numerous prefigurations for this light, including uncreated light, divine grace, uncreated energies, the shekinah glory seen by the Israelites, the fire Moses saw in the bush that burnt without being consumed, the lightning seen upon Mount Sinai. These names and images might sound a bit impersonal, like inanimate energies, but in fact they all denote the personal God as he comes to us.

So how does the transfiguration icon indicate all these rich truths?

Garments and the cosmos (7)

Christ's garments are usually shown white, or sometimes orange with gold lines called assist. What is interesting is that we are looking not at an orb of pure light, but at a body and garments radiant with light. The icon does not depict a dissolution of matter, but a transfiguration of matter. This is not dematerialisation, but a union of divine grace with matter. It is helpful to think of a stained-glass window; the light passing through it makes the glass more brilliant; it does not make it clear glass nor dissolve it into pure sunlight. There is a synergy of light and matter.

But we are not seeing in the icon just one garment transfigured. Christ's garments stand for something much bigger. To understand the larger implications of what is happening on Mount Tabor (the traditional place the event occurred), we can note that the Greek word for the material world is *cosmos*. This word also means adornment and thus also garment. So when we see Christ transfiguring his garments, we can read Christ transfiguring his whole material creation. This is a cosmos that He, as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, created and sustains.

This truth is beautifully expressed by the seventh century St Maximus the Confessor:

And with us and for us Christ embraced the whole creation through what is in the centre, the extremes as being part of Himself, and He wrapped them around Himself, insolubly united with one another: Paradise and the inhabited world, heaven and earth, the sensible and the intelligible, having Himself like us a body and sensibility and soul and intellect... He recapitulated in Himself all things, showing that the whole creation is one, as if it were also a man.

(St Maximus, Ambigua 41:91, quoted in “Man and the Cosmos” by Lars Thunberg, 1985, page 90).

There are various Biblical texts that also allude to this cosmic transfiguration, but the most famous is that in Romans:

*For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, **in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.** We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:19-21)*

We have before us an image of the Spirit of God wishing to be manifest through not only humankind but also, by the agency of humankind as its priest, through all of creation.

Mountains. (8)

As with the garments, we note that icons depict landscape in an unusual way. On the one hand they are depicted naturalistically enough for us to recognize them as mountains. On the other hand, their shape and strong highlights are otherworldly. What is happening here?

Icon landscapes and buildings generally reflect the inner dynamics of the sacred event. The mountains in the baptism icon part like the waves of the Red Sea, (9) and in Nativity icons the central mountain stretches upwards, expressing what Paul has just described: ‘*the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth... wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship*’.

(10) We can note also the flashes of painted white on the mountain tops. These calligraphic highlights suggest the inner radiance of things, shooting forth. These strong highlights might suggest what the Church Fathers call the divine *logoi* or words spoken by God the Word, each thing’s inner essence.

When God the Word created each thing he did it with a word, and this word or logos remains within that thing, sustaining it and directing it towards the age to come. As the letter to the Hebrews writes, Christ ‘upholds all things by the word of his power’ (Heb 1:3.)

Through Christ the Logos, the logos within each thing is more clearly revealed to our spiritual eyes, each according to their capacity. We no longer see just the outer, material reality of this world and people, but we see these logoi shining through all things. We see the world not just as a marvellous fact, but as a gift and expression of divine love. It is as though, along with the gift, icons also depict the card that reads: ‘From God with Love’.

(11) Icons often make colours more intense than in nature. We can see this for example in the 1000-year-old illuminations in the Menologion of Basil II. It is as though the mountains are aflame. **(12)** I don’t know about you, but for me the paintings by Monet the Impressionist also give a similar hint of such paradisaical glory, where light permeates and animates matter. The fullest beauty is to be found when light unites with matter and shines forth from within it, not merely reflecting off its surface. Such radiance is an image of divinity united with creation.

(13) Our icon is called The Transfiguration of Christ. But the Orthodox church hymns that go with this icon tell us that it is also a transfiguration of the disciples. Their spiritual and material eyes were transformed so that they could see Christ as he always was:

Having uncovered, O Saviour, a little of the light of Thy divinity to those who went up with Thee into the mountain, Thou hast made them lovers of Thy heavenly glory. (Stichera Matins)

This leads us to our second theme, the transfiguration of the human person.

2. Transformation of human person

I want now to dwell on what the transfiguration icon tells us about what it is to be fully human. What it is to be fully human can be summarised in five areas: to be fully human is to be deified, communal, prophetic, royal and priestly. Let us look at each of these in turn.

a) Deification

The Gospels and the icon tell us that this person on the mountain top shining with light is not only God but is also a human of flesh and blood. Christ’s transfiguration therefore shows us the true destiny of human nature, namely, to be transformed by the glory and splendour of divinity. As one hymn puts it:

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

We were not created to follow the creator at a distance but to be united with him, to participate in his life. To be a fully human person is not to be merely human but to be a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, a living temple. The theological term for this union in love between humans and God is deification or theosis.

Christ's Transfiguration should be no surprise to us, for he is God and God is light. As one hymn puts it:

Thou hast shown them upon the holy mountain the hidden and blinding light of Thy nature and Thy divine beauty beneath the flesh; (Sessional hymn)

What is surprising is that he had concealed this light most of the time. He concealed it because he had not wanted to coerce people by a continual display of his divinity, nor to frighten them.

However, when he did give the disciples a glimpse of this light, he revealed to them not only his personal divinity but also what it is to be fully human. He restored humanity to its former glory and more:

In His own person He showed them the nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the image....Thou wast transfigured, and hast made the nature that had grown dark in Adam to shine again as lightning, transforming it into the glory and splendour of Thine own divinity. (Aposticha of Great Vespers)

This theosis is what St Paul refers to when he writes that God has given us many promises, 'that by these we might become partakers (κοινωνοὶ) of the divine nature'. Peter is telling us that we are called to commune with and share in the divine nature, not only to behold it at a distance.

This theosis is why icons always show saints with haloes. These denote that God is dwelling within the saint, not merely resting upon them temporarily. In transfiguration icons the apostles do not yet have haloes. **(14)** This is because this event is before Pentecost, which is when the Holy Spirit descended to dwell within and among believers. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost explains why the Church's liturgical year is numbered by weeks after Pentecost, the fifth Sunday after Pentecost and so on. Pentecost is the birth of the Church, the birth of a new people.

From all this it is evident that God became man in Christ not only to deal with sin, but positively to reunite human nature with the divine nature. The single personhood (or *hypostasis* to use the Greek theological term) of the man

Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. **(15)** This is why icons of Christ often have inscribed in his halo the two Greek words Ο ΩΝ, which mean The One Who Is, the Greek translation of God's name in Hebrew, Jehovah. This man of flesh and blood is none other than the same God who descend upon Mont Sinai in thunder and lightning and spoke to Moses.

So when God united his divine nature with our human nature in the single person of Christ, he flooded our nature with his divine glory. As one transfiguration hymn puts it:

Being complete God, Thou hast become complete man, bringing together the nature of man and the complete Godhead in Thy Person which Moses and Elijah saw on Mount Tabor in two natures. (Ode 3)

b) Community

(16) The transfiguration icon reveals a second thing about what it is to be human: it is to be in relationship, to be in community. The etymology of the word person suggests relationship. *Persona* in Latin, and *prosopon* in Greek, both mean face, and faces are meant for communicating with others.

How precisely does the transfiguration icon suggest this communal nature of the human destiny?

Firstly, Christ took three disciples up the mountain, not just one. We note that John is shown young, James middle-aged, and Peter old. Between them they cover the whole generational range of the human person.

Second, the Gospel accounts tell us that Christ did not appear alone but with Moses and Elijah, and that they communed among themselves. Luke gives more detail, saying that 'they appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem'.

The hymns tell us that these two prophets represent the living and the dead the living, for Moses died a natural death, while Elijah did not taste death but was taken up into heaven in a chariot. The icon therefore affirms another level of communion, that between the living and the dead, between those in heaven and those on earth.

The third and ultimate expression of community revealed in the Transfiguration event is the source of all community: The Holy Trinity. God himself is not a monad but a community of three divine Persons in one nature, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Gospel accounts tell us that at the transfiguration the voice of God the Father was heard saying: 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'

The man Jesus Christ is none other than the Second Person of the Trinity, the Logos incarnate.

The Gospels tells us that as Peter spoke a bright cloud covered or overshadowed them. This bright cloud is understood by tradition to be the Holy Spirit. The term overshadow (ἐπεσκίασεν in Greek) is the same that the Archangel Gabriel used at the Annunciation: ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow (ἐπισκιάσει) you’ (Lk 1:35).

We come now to the three-fold and related ministries of prophet and royal priesthood. I would say that our ecological crisis is the result of mankind not fulfilling these three roles. Before we began to desecrate the world in deed, we had first to deconsecrate it in our minds.

c) Prophet

A prophet sees and hears God, and in this icon the disciples behold God shining forth in Christ, and hear the voice of the Father (in mosaics one often sees a hand above to suggest the Father’s voice). And, as we have discussed already, they see God not only in the face of Christ but also through his transfigured garments, through all material creation. To be fully human is to see and hear God’s love speak to us through this wonderful world.

The way an icon is painted aims to help us see in this way. An icon shows not just the outer and material aspect of its subject and its inanimate elements like landscapes, trees and animals, but also what God is revealing through that event and those things. The icon’s form aims to suggest a transfigured creation. Icons are therefore abstract in the literal meaning of that word: they ‘draw out’ and manifest the essence. As the fourteenth-century saint Gregory of Sinai wrote:

A right view of created things depends upon a truly spiritual knowledge of visible and invisible realities. Visible realities are objects perceived by the senses, while invisible realities are noetic, intelligent, intelligible and divine. (St Gregory of Sinai Text Nr. 25, in “One Hundred and Thirty Seven texts,” Philokalia, Vol. IV, p. 217)

d) Royal

The Apostle Peter writes that we are ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:9). What is it to be royal? The ultimate role of a king or queen to raise their subjects to a higher level, not to subjugate them. It therefore a job akin to that of a traditional artist. While painting an icon I am very aware that this act of making is itself a sort of royal task, for I take the raw materials of pigment, wood and egg and raise them up to a higher level than before, uniting them together into a mediator of God’s grace. The activity is like a poet uniting words into a poem, or a composer organising notes into a symphony.

This critical role of the human person in transforming raw creation is perhaps why God said his creation was good after each of the first five days, but that it

was very good only on the sixth day after he had made man. Through our royal and priestly activity, creation passes from good to very good. Of course, if we turn into tyrants and not godly royals, then ecological disaster follows.

The royal role of the human person naturally leads us to our next theme, the priestly role of humankind.

e) Priestly

A priest mediates between creator and creation, and in both directions. An ordained priest turns west and faces the people to give the blessing in the name of Christ. But he also joins the people of God in facing towards the east, and with them offers praise and thanksgiving to God for all creation.

(17) To illustrate this priestly role of the human person we can do no better than consider the remarkable sixth-century mosaic in the apse of Sant'Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna, Italy.

In the apse we see Bishop Apollinare in the midst of an emerald green paradise. Its trees, birds and rocks are surrounded by a warm glow of orange tesserae. Apollinare is vested, celebrating the Holy Liturgy. His hands are raised in prayer, just as a priest does at the epiclesis when the Holy Spirit is called down upon the people and upon the bread and wine, to make them the body and blood of Christ.

Above Apollinare, the transfiguration is symbolically rendered as a huge golden, radiant and jewelled cross, with Christ depicted in its centre. It is surrounded by a dark blue orb with stars. Either side are Moses and Elijah. Below, the three disciples are depicted symbolically as three sheep.

(18) Below the sheep and paradise scene is a mosaic of four celebrating bishops. **(19)** Flanking them is a panel to the left showing the emperor presenting gifts to the bishop, and to the right, the priest king Melchisedec presiding at the altar, with Abel offering a lamb and Abraham his son.

(20) Further down still is the church's sanctuary with its altar, and beyond that, the nave where the people gather to celebrate the Holy Liturgy.

(21) Everything in an Orthodox church, from glass and stone tesserae, the subject matter of the mosaics, the physical light from the windows and lamps, the building itself and its sacred furnishings, and of course the clergy and people are united in a single symphony of praise, thanksgiving and priestly offering to the creator.

All this calls to mind the words of St Leontius of Cyprus (556-634):

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.²

² St Leontius of Cyprus, *PG*, xciii, 1604AB (transl. Kallistos Ware).

This eucharistic offering and calling down of the Holy Spirit has a profound effect upon the whole world. It transfigures it. (22) This is why the Apollinare in Classe mosaic composes everything harmoniously, why everything, even rocks, trees and birds, have a sort of halo in orange and yellow tesserae.

(23) Although bishop Apollinare is a particular man, an ordained bishop celebrating a particular liturgy, he is fulfilling a priestly role that every person is called to do in their own unique way, and with cosmic consequences. As a Russian poet once wrote:

Every time the priest celebrates the Eucharist, he holds in his hands the whole world, like an apple. (A Russian poet, quoted by Alexander Schmemman in “Church, World, Mission”, 1979, page 222)

We are mere humans, but can work in synergy with God, to, in a sense, complete the work he has begun. We are given a lamp, but we need to turn it on. The beauty of the rocks, trees and birds is more fully manifest through the liturgy, through thanksgiving. This is why gold and radiant colours are found in icons. All matter and the saints are shown bathed in light.

To make an icon or mosaic is to praise and give thanks not with words but with paint, stone and glass. It is to raise up matter to a higher plane, to make clearer God’s activity in the world. It is a graphic demonstration of what each person is called to do in within their own field of work and endeavour, be they farmer, carpenter, doctor or whatever.

This universal priestly ministry of course includes women as well as men. Among the best iconographers I know are women. But beyond the ordained priestly ministry and sacred arts like iconography, every believer, male and female, is anointed to live their lives in the world as prophets and royal priests. The holy chrism used by the Orthodox Church to anoint every person after their baptism is the same used to anoint kings. The lay ministry is not to be defined negatively as not being a priest. Each person is anointed to the lay ministry. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has said: One is priest (Christ); some are priests (the ordained); and all are priests (the laity).

3. The Transformation of time and space

Orthodox theology speaks of two types of time. There is *chronos*, the clock time that we are used to. In this we can only be in one ‘compartment’ of time at a time, which is the present. Chronos is in this sense one-dimensional. Or put another way, it is cyclical, condemned to an endless seven-day week repetition, with the door of death waiting at the end. There is a certain fatalism to this circular repetition.

But there is also *kairos*, which can be described as God’s descent into *chronos* to open it into eternity. Call it divine time if you like, although God is beyond time, for time was created along with the world. Kairos opens the closed circularity of *chronos* into a direction. And this direction is towards the

symbolic east, the second coming of Christ and the new Jerusalem. Christ entered and lived and died within the seven-day cycle of chronos, but he rose on the eighth day, which is also the first and only day of eternity. And this eternity is not a mere extension of the time we already know it, but is entrance into another mode of existence.

(24) How then does the transfiguration icon and other festal icons suggest this union of divine action with created time? On the most basic level, the transfiguration icon shows the disciples gathered together with Moses and Elijah, who lived on earth centuries before the transfiguration. The past is this shown present with the present. And the Pentecost icon shows St Paul seated with the apostles, even though at that time he was not even a Christian. The Nativity icon usually shows Christ twice, in the crib and being washed by the midwives.

But on a deeper level, the icon most expresses this divine time when seen in the context of the liturgical year. It then becomes matter moving through time, bearing the power of the resurrection. This is why the word ‘today’ is used so often in the festal texts. It is used at least thirteen times in the transfiguration.

Hé who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, sáying, ‘I am Gód who is’, is transfigured today upon Mount Tábor. (‘Lord, I call upon you’, Small Vespers)

Today upon Mount Tábor Christ hath changed the darkened nature of Ádam. (Aposticha, Small Vespers).

These hymns call the faithful to participate today in an event that happened two thousand years ago—not in their imaginations, but in truth. I find it helpful to think of a past sacred event as a fountain: it springs from a particular place (a time on history), but its waters spread out through the surrounding land (forward and back through time).

The transfiguration icon also looks forward to the future, making Christ’s present glory a prefiguration of his second coming in glory:

Thou wast transfigured upon Mount Tábor, showing the exchange mortal men will make with Thy glory at the second and fearful coming, O Sáviour. (Kathisma of Matins)

(25) Our mosaic in Ravenna, along with many other apsidal mosaics in ancient Rome, express this union of past, present and future in extremely rich and profound ways. The mosaics of Santa Prassede in Rome, made in the early ninth century, do this par excellence. The apse mosaic depicts an event yet to come, Christ’s Second Coming (the clue that it depicts his second coming is the brightly coloured sunrise clouds). He is flanked by Peter and Paul, who lived on earth in the past but who are alive in Christ now. They present to Christ the two

patrons of the church, Praxedes and Pudentiana. Pope Paschal is on the left, and he has a square blue halo to denote that he was alive at the time of the mosaic's creation. He presents a church to Christ, since he commissioned the church and its mosaics.

(26) On the triumphal arch are the twenty-four elders mentioned in the book of Revelation, along with the four living creatures and other angels, all worshipping Christ. The worshippers on earth in the church of Santa Prassede are reminded that they are participating in heavenly worship. Christ has thus overthrown the division not only within time but also through space.

Finally, on the second westernmost arch is shown the bejewelled New Jerusalem, 'coming down from God out of heaven, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband' as the book of Revelation describes it (Rev 21:2). The apostles approach Christ left and right, and all around are saints, men and women, lay and cleric, angels and men.

(27) To bring things forward to today, this slide shows a wall painting that I have just completed. Like the Santa Prassede mosaic, its design compresses present and future into the present. It shows Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James meeting the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene is called Equal to the Apostles, because she was the first to meet the risen Christ and then declared this to the frightened apostles. The image is flanked by the Annunciation, Christ's death and resurrection are suggested by the empty tomb, his transfiguration by the mandorla, and his second coming by the jewelled cross, the 'sign of the Son of man' that will be seen in the heavens at his return.

Conclusion

The worshippers in a church experience all these panel icons, mosaics, and other divine images as a unit, like an orchestra. The past and future are gathered together into the present, since life is to do with presence and not absence. Those on earth are gathered in the same community as those in heaven; angels dwell among men, and God dwells with his people.

Herein lies the power of the image compared to the word. In such a vision of icons, mosaics or frescoes, one sees in an instant and in wholeness something that words would have required prolonged and linear explanation to describe. In this way, icons above else affirm presence, the presence of all persons in one divine-human commonwealth. This vision does not present intellectual ideologies, concepts or regulations, but living relationships. This is why icons do not have faces turned away; they show us persons in relationship either with us the viewers or with one another. To be human is to love and to accept love.

