

ICONS AND THE MATERIAL WORLD²

by Brother Aidan

Why did God make us with a body and place us amidst a material world? Why didn't He make us like bodiless angels? God made matter, so it must matter. But how does it matter? What role does the material world have in our relationship with a God who is Spirit?

To find what the Orthodox Church teaches about these questions we will look at eleven icons. In the first two icons we shall look at life in Paradise before the Fall. In the next four icons we shall consider the Fall and how Christ has healed us and the material world of its effects. Finally, in the last four icons, we shall look at how Christ effected the union of God with us and the material world.

1. PARADISE

Creation

We will begin with the earliest known hymn in Anglo-Saxon, written in the seventh century by St Caedmon. What we have is only a fragment of a larger work, retained by the Venerable Bede:

*Now the works of the Father of glory
Shall praise heaven's guardian
The Creator's power and conception
as He established every wonder.
First He fashioned for children of men
Heaven as a roof. The Holy Shaper
Mankind's guardian, formed then
The middle realm, the earth for men,
Eternal Lord, Master Almighty...*

- Since it is made by God, the material world is *good and beautiful*. It has a *vital role* in our relationship with God and with one another.
He established every wonder
- The emphasis in the Fathers is not on the gulf between man and the non-human world (so-called "nature"), or on spiritual creation and material creation, but on *Creator and creation, created and uncreated*.
- Each thing is created by a *word of God*, and this word remains in each thing, sustaining, and directing it towards its end, which is the Logos who spoke the word. Thus, the material world is always linked to God, not only in its creation in time, but in its continued existence. Matter is a sacred ground of God's revelation, a little holy mountain, a burning bush. These words existed as thoughts in all

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² An address given at Iona, Scotland, 28 September, 2000

eternity in the mind of God, though they were spoken in time. Creation is *the work of the Father of glory*.

This glory is uncreated light, uncreated energies, something real which we can experience. This glory is, if you like, concealed within all created things. Through return to our pristine state of purity our eyes are opened to behold this fiery glory, even as Moses beheld the burning bush.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights (James 1:17)

We turn now to the human person, who, among other things, was created to “hear” these words hidden within created things.

Adam and Eve in Paradise

- We are called to *discover* the inner essences or divine words which are hidden within each thing. This is our *prophetic* role, to hear the word of God and proclaim it, magnify it. This is the significance of *naming* things. According to St Gregory the New Theologian the ‘back side’ of God which Moses was permitted to see is this majesty, that is, the ‘reasons’ (logoi) of creation.³

Creation also provided for Adam and Eve visual names for God. Creation is a visual dictionary which provides us with a vocabulary. This vocabulary allows communion with our Creator. According to St Gregory of Nyssa,

the visible miracle in natures are the matter for the divine names of God. The miracles seen in everything provide the theological names by which we call God wise, powerful, good, holy....⁴

Why did God place the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden? What is its significance? According to St Ephraim the Syrian, this represents knowledge of the created world. Man was intended first to eat the tree of life, that is, to acknowledge God as Life itself, and not any created thing. Having done this, he could then partake of God through the created world. The tree of knowledge is therefore seen by Ephraim as something good, to be partaken of in the right time. It is essentially the life of sacrament, in which Adam and Eve could have partaken of divine life united to and hidden within created life.

*The Tree that is called the Tree of knowledge symbolises the gate of Paradise...
...it is the likeness of its glorious Creator
In whose hidden abode through the gates of knowledge all who are perceptive may approach His hiddenness..*

*Through this gate of knowledge the intellect enters in,
explores every kind of treasure,*

³ St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain

⁴ St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, “Homily 1 on the Song of Songs

*brings out every kind of riches.*⁵

- The material world, as vast as it is quantitatively, is actually contained in the human person; it has its destiny in the human person. We are a *macrocosm*, a large world within a small world. This is the basis of our *priestly* task. The material world becomes fully *articulate* through us in the praise of God. We were also created to offer the world in thanksgiving, to be Eucharistic creatures.

*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.*⁶

- We are called to *cultivate* and *transform* the world, to weave it into a garment, to make the fecund world into a garden.

“be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion...” (Genesis 1:28).

We are called to be deified ourselves, to be participants in divine life, so that when we cultivate the world we make it participate in our deification. In this way we were destined to *transfigure* the world. This is our *royal*, kingly task. Our power over the world is not to lower it, to enslave it, but to lift it into a yet higher plane.

*Man ought to use every means to raise his clay, so to speak, and set it on the throne of God.*⁷

This was our calling and the destiny of the material world. But we failed. What actually did we do wrong? And what effect did our wrong-doing have on the material world?

Adam and Eve mistakenly thought that creation had life in itself. Instead of receiving God who is Life Himself through creation, we tried to draw life from the works of life. They wanted the taste, the pleasure and the desire (Genesis 3:6) without the divine substance.

2. CORRUPTION AND ITS HEALING

The Fall

- Through the Fall we failed in our prophetic role. We failed to see the word of God within each thing and partook of the husk and not the kernel. We did not see the logoi of things, but only the outer form. So we ate death rather than life in partaking of them in this idolatrous way.

This preference for created things over the creator had accumulative effects. It hid from us the glorious divine words or essences hidden within created things. Rather than seeing creation as it truly is, full of glory, man’s distorted nature saw creation in a distorted way. St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain says this:

⁵ St Ephraim the Syrian “Hymns on Paradise” XV:2,7

⁶ Leontius of Jerusalem

⁷ St Symeon the new Theologian, “Hymns” 26:ii; translation John Chryssavgis

...those who are spiritually immature and passionate and have not attained perfection and dispassion should guard themselves from being preoccupied with the logoi in nature...When the mind is still passionate it cannot see the immaterial and spiritual logoi hidden in the shapes and beauty of the physical nature and the passionate and irrational imagination take precedence to formulate these logoi passionately according to its own standards...⁸

We made an *idol* of creation. The material world thus *lost its sacramental quality*. In the words of Theophan the Recluse:

The spiritual self had power over the soul and body while it was in living communion with God. Then it received divine power from Him. When living communion with God was cut off, so was the flow of divine power. Left to itself, the spirit could no longer master the soul or body, but was taken captive by them. Then the soul - and through it the body - assumed control over man, so that his life revolved around them.⁹

- Instead of being priests and offering creation in thanksgiving, we *hid* from God. So *creation became mute*.
- We *deformed* ourselves instead of transforming the world. Instead of leading ourselves and the material world into divine life, we led ourselves into a fleshly life and deprived the world of its potential for transfiguration. The world therefore earnestly groans, awaiting its deliverance from the load of mortality.

The sun hid its rays, the moon and stars were turned to blood, the mountains were afraid when Paradise was shut.¹⁰

Our failure to defend and transform the world opened the material world to be tainted by demonic forces.

When they realised the foolishness of their action, Adam and Eve became disgusted with themselves, and hid from God. By losing likeness to God, they changed their image of God, and thought of Him as an ogre. Their wrong choice distorted their perception of creation as well as God. St Ephraim says:

*It is easy to understand how mankind has come to hate creation:
Having become hateful to themselves, they hold creation to be hateful...¹¹*

How has God healed this predicament, both our personal, human predicament and that of the material world?

The most immediate effect of the fall was that mortality was introduced, and pain and suffering.

⁸ St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, "Handbook of Spiritual Counsel" in Classics of Western Spirituality Series, Paulist Press, 1989; page 203

⁹ Theophan the Recluse, quoted by Robin Amis in "A Different Christianity"

¹⁰ Vespers of the Sunday of Forgiveness, "Lord I have cried"

¹¹ St Ephraim the Syrian "Hymns on Paradise" XV:11

Adam departed lamenting: I who was once clothed in the glory of immortality must now wrap myself miserably in the skins of mortality.¹²

But this suffering was medicinal, helping to break man's bondage to created things. God arranged things so that the very thing we idolised would cause pain to us. In this way we would be weaned off attachment to it, or at least, reduce our attachment to it. The pain of this life would urge our spirits to seek something higher. A memory of life in Paradise remains in each of us, and this compares itself with the partial and difficult life we lead now. This discrepancy between memory of our Edenic homeland and our present state causes heart searching. It also compels us to seek out within created things the divinity for which we are thirsting, since these material things are near to us and immediate. So we begin to seek the words of God within the world. In the words of Shakespeare:

*Sweet are the uses of adversity:
Which like a toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a gracious jewel in his head:
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongue in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything,¹³*

Nativity

We can say that by His life on earth the Lord taught us practical theology. Through the Cross He granted us the possibility of natural knowledge, and by his ascension he opened the way for mystical theology.

- Christ is *the second Adam* coming to do what we, the first Adam failed to do, and the Mother of God is the *second Eve*. Christ is the Tree of Life, planted in the world to make it paradise.

For through your birth you shape all things afresh, making them new once more and leading them back again to their first beauty¹⁴

- Christ is the Word Himself, who enters his creation and reveals the true essences or names of things.
- *Creation recognises Christ*, not only as its maker, but as a *true man*. This who will lead it to its fulfilment, and worships Him.

What shall we offer Thee, O Christ, who for our sakes hast appeared on earth as man? Every creature made by Thee offers thee thanks: the angels offer Thee a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi gifts; the shepherds their wonder; the earth its cave; the wilderness the manger; and we offer Thee a virgin Mother.¹⁵

Eden offers a cave and a star discloses Christ, the Sun, to those in darkness. Magi, enlightened by faith, worship with gifts; shepherds behold the wonder and angels sing praises. They who adored the stars through a star are

¹² Vespers of the Sunday of Forgiveness, "Lord I have cried"

¹³ Shakespeare in "As You Like It" Act 3, Scene 1

¹⁴ Feast of Christ's Nativity

¹⁵ Great Vespers of the Feast of Nativity.

taught to worship you, the Sun of righteousness, and to know the Dayspring from on high.¹⁶

Early catacomb depictions show Christ as Orpheus, whose harp-playing tamed wild beasts. Similarly the wild creation sees a true man, Christ, becomes tame, and willingly comes and offers itself in worship. And so creation becomes articulate once again. Christ becomes the priest.

Shunning its vain attempt to become God, the whole creation sings, like the three children, in praise of the eternal word, who now empties Himself.¹⁷

- Christ begins his ministry of transforming the world. Whereas we were called as humans to become gods, God becomes human for us. What we were to deify by ascent, God deifies by descent.

Heaven and earth are united today, for Christ is born. Today has God come to earth, and man gone up to heaven.¹⁸

Theophany

- The *Father speaks*, opening us again to hearing the logoi of creation and the Logos Himself.
- *Christ cleanses* the waters of the demonic activity
Christ now comes in haste to the waters, to crush the heads of the dragons...Today the waters of the Lord are transformed into healing by the coming of the Lord. Today the whole creation is watered with mystical streams.¹⁹
- The *Spirit anoints* the water, giving it again its sacramental, grace-bearing quality.

Transfiguration

- Christ reveals to us not only that he is God, but also reveals what it is to be *truly human*: to be truly human is to be deified.
Today on Mount Tabor Christ has changed the darkened nature of Adam, and filling it with brightness He has made it godlike.²⁰
You, O Christ, with invisible hands has fashioned man in your image: and You have now displayed the original beauty in this same body formed by You..²¹
- Christ's *garments participate* in His transfiguration. In His garments we see the destiny of the whole material world: to be a garment of the Church, and so to participate in her deification. Our bodies do not stop at our skin, but continue through the whole universe, for we are nurtured by the sun, by earth, by water, by air.

¹⁶ Feast of Christ's Nativity

¹⁷ Feast of Christ's Nativity

¹⁸ Feast of Christ's Nativity

¹⁹ Theophany

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ The Feast of the Transfiguration

*You have preserved the bush unharmed, O Master, though it was united with fire, and You have shown to Moses Your flesh shining with divine brightness...*²²

Crucifixion and resurrection

- The tree of death becomes the tree of life.
*The Tree of true life was planted in the place of the skull, and upon it hast Thou, the eternal King, worked salvation in the midst of the earth. Exalted today, it sanctifies the ends of the world...*²³
- By allowing death to swallow him, Life swallows death and conquers it. The cross *purifies* the world of mortality and fills it with light:
*Now are all things filled with light; Heaven and earth, and the nethermost regions of the earth. let at creation, therefore, celebrate the arising of Christ, whereby we are established.*²⁴
- After Christ's resurrection and before His ascension, he appears and disappears. In this time He is reuniting paradise and earth, according to St Maximus the Confessor.

Christ came not only to return us to our pristine state before the fall, but to go further. Most of the Fathers say that although Adam and Eve were innocent before the Fall, they were not perfect. Perfection consisted in their deification, and for this God would have to become man, for man cannot climb up to God. How precisely was this effected by Christ, and what involvement does the material world have in this process?

3. DEIFICATION

Ascension

- By ascending through the middle heaven Christ has reunited heaven and earth.
- By ascending through the angelic realms as a human, Christ "reintroduced" the angels to the human and material realms. By listening to a fallen angel we sinned not only against ourselves and God, but against the good angels.
*Beholding Christ, the mediator between God and men, with His flesh in the heights, the choirs of the angels were amazed, and with one accord they sang a song of victory.*²⁵
- Christ takes matter into heaven in His body. For all eternity, through the human nature which He has assumed, *Christ makes matter part of divine life* - though not according to the divine essence, but according to grace.
*Having come down from heaven to the things of earth, O Christ, as God with Yourself you resurrected Adam's form, which lay prostrate in the lower hold's of Hades' vault; and in Your Ascension to the heights you led it into the heavens and seated it upon the throne of your Father, since You, O friend of man, are merciful.*²⁶

²² The Feast of the Transfiguration

²³ The Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Lity of Great Vespers,

²⁴ Pascha, Ode Three of the Matins Canon.

²⁵ The Feat of ascension, Ode one of the Matins canon.

²⁶ The Feast of Ascension, sessional hymn of matins.

Pentecost

- Pentecost is the subjective fulfilment of Ascension. The Spirit can now come through the Apostles to fill the material world (cosmos waits in darkness, to be filled with light).

You have abundantly poured forth Your Spirit on all flesh, even as you promised, and all creation is filled with your knowledge, O Lord...²⁷

The New Jerusalem

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.²⁸

- The scriptures end not with earth going up to heaven, or earth being destroyed altogether, but with heaven coming down to earth. Earth is transfigured, not obliterated or dissolved.
- We pass from a jungle, to a garden, and thence to a city.

Christ in Glory

- In Christ the universe is given its head. It becomes a cosmos, an adornment for the Body of Christ (hence the combination on Christ's garments of earth red with divine gold).

[The Father] has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.²⁹

God has raised us up with Christ and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.³⁰

- Christ draws all the logoi of things into himself, who spoke them in the first place, and through these logoi he draws to himself all those things these logoi created. He unites them in Himself, without them losing their integrity, their distinctive properties. This union and distinction means perfect love reigns.

From [Christ] comes the cause of existence of all things which are. Through Him comes the constitution and preservation of all, and thus, to Him all things return, looking with ineffable desire and love toward the Creator and provider of life.³¹

- In Christ the universe is *transfigured* through His assumed humanity.

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.³²

²⁷ The Feast of Pentecost, Ode six of the Canon of Matins.

²⁸ Rev. 21:1,2

²⁹ Eph. 1:22,23

³⁰ Ephesians 2:6

³¹ St Basil, quoted by St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, "Handbook of Spiritual Counsel

³² Ephesians 1:9,10