

Colossians 1:15-20

John 1: 1-14

Intro

It seems a little odd, I think, that here we are at the beginning of February, with Bible readings that point towards Christmas. I know that time flies by as one gets older but preparing for Christmas already does seem rather premature. So, what's going on with our readings? Why are we thinking of Jesus as the word made flesh, the image of God again, so soon.

Last week Eliza reminded us of the experiences of Simeon and Anna when they met Jesus in the Temple for his ritual presentation. Luke reports this in chapter 2 of his gospel. Simeon knew that he would see the Messiah before he died. When Mary and Joseph arrived for a sacrifice, Simeon realised that Jesus was the promised saviour. Anna, similarly filled by God's spirit, was filled by joy and expectation at this encounter and wanted everyone else to know that redemption had come into being.

So this week we have both St Paul and St John putting some context into these two experiences. We find ourselves facing Jesus and having an opportunity to develop our understanding of who Jesus is.

"Everyone will be famous for 15 minutes" is a phrase attributed to Andy Warhol in the 1960s and certainly many people today are hugely concerned with their image and how it is presented. With the supremacy of mobile technology, each of us has the opportunity to put one's view across more easily than ever before. With Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter having one's moment in the sunlight of celebrity is easier than ever. Anyone can curate their timeline rather than relying on history to have noticed their 15 minutes. The final published image is almost more important than the real person portrayed. But the idea of an official image is not new.

Some years back I had the privilege of going to an exhibition of paintings believed to be the sole work of Leonard da Vinci. There were some truly glorious and priceless pictures on display, Everything from his broad range of work was available from some small sketch drawing, through some stunning portraits to the newly restored and attributed picture "Salvator Mundi". Only the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa had failed to join her sibling art at the exhibition. The key feature of all the items on display was that the authenticity of their production by the hand of the master himself was not in dispute. That this had been possible is nothing short of miraculous. Like many great masters Leonardo's studio produced many great works in his own style, but probably executed by one of his studio workers. Not for the great man himself a scribbled note pasted on the back of the Mona Lisa saying: "this is one of mine, folks. Leo☺"

Being able to determine whether a particular artwork is definitively from the hand of one artist is from the work of years of study: of brushwork, of timber analysis or paper production, of paint pigment construction and so on, as well as comparison with works known to be by contemporaries.

Yet, when we look at the world round about us, the hand of the maker is all over his creation. The bible shows us many examples of how God's handiwork can be seen in the universe.

Today's readings are all about image – the image of God – as revealed. But not an image carefully crafted and engineered. The image of God is not subject to makeup or wardrobe malfunctions or of false attribution. There is no need to determine whether the image of

God is the result of careful manipulation or not. The image of God is made known to us, is made manifest in the person of Jesus.

Paul writing in the letter to the Colossians reminds us that in Jesus, we see "the image of the invisible God." He is an image of one unseen. In the Gospels John reminds us that no one had ever seen God only the one who has come from God (John 1: 18). So in today's reading we see the development in this understanding of who Jesus is as the image of God.

Yet the image that Paul uses is trying to reassert the supremacy of Jesus over all things. In the church at Colossae, there were those who tried to lead the believers astray from faith by suggesting that Jesus is somehow inadequate as a means of grace. Those who were false teachers were trying to persuade the Colossian believers that there needed some form of secret knowledge and ritual in order to come to a full understanding. So Paul counters this with the section we have today.

Just before our passage begins, Paul has reminded the people that, by faith, they have come to share and experience the Kingdom of Jesus who brings redemption. The false teachers were suggesting that there was somehow "more" to fully receiving this position. And this is what Paul seeks to reverse.

This concept of the image of God finds itself in the Greek word "icon" a word we usually associate with a painting from the Orthodox Christian tradition. Such an image is one of worship or meditation within that tradition, along with part of the liturgical art of the churches. The purpose of an icon is to give a focus to meditation or prayer rather than being an object of veneration itself. But it is the resemblance of something else rather than the thing or person.

The false teachers of Colossians were trying to persuade the early believers that they needed some special secret knowledge and practices in order to understand this hidden reality. But Paul gives us something different but in language that counters the hidden nature of the false teaching. It's all out in the open in plain language.

When Paul talks in the Letter to the Colossians of Jesus being the image of the invisible God, he is asserting that Jesus has the fulness of God (verse 19). Written around AD 60, the letter has the intention of bringing the people of the church in the city of Colossae back to an understanding of the true faith. Paul teaches that in Jesus alone is the route to redemption and a place in God's perfect ideal kingdom. No fancy rituals or secret knowledge can usurp the power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

For Paul, everything experienced here on earth has its origin in Jesus (v16) all power and authority derive from him, and everything is sustained by him (v17) and he alone is supreme (v18).

A couple of decades later, John's Gospel puts the situation the same way. By now the early church has had to deal with a few different heresies, false teachings, about the nature of Jesus and his relation to God Almighty. So the introduction to John's Gospel hits straight back and leaves us in no uncertain terms – "the word was with God and the word was God" v1.

John starts off with the supremacy of Jesus. He is present before anything else came into being and was responsible for all of the created order. For John, as for followers of Jesus since then, we can see Jesus as the revelation of God – the manifestation of God's presence and creative power. This is the new creation personified – "God spoke and said .. and there was" to precis the accounts of Genesis. Everything else that John writes and tells us of Jesus is directed towards us recognising that in Jesus we see God and no one else. No sense of Jesus being "a bit like God" or "similar to God." Rather, his assertion, by which

followers of Jesus live their lives and face their deaths, is simply put "Jesus is God – end of story." For those who believe in Jesus, all else is the proof of who Jesus is.

Having set out his understanding of who Jesus is, he embarks on revealing how many others came to discover Jesus and see the wonders that he performed and the effect that he had on others. Just a couple of weeks back, Jonathan related the account of the Marriage Feast at Cana – the first of Jesus signs. And just before the end of the gospel John tells us what he has been about all along:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20: 30,31)

For Paul and John, for faithful followers of Jesus throughout the centuries, this is all that matters. By recognising Jesus for who he is, believing and trusting him and by following his commands, then the gift of eternal life is theirs and ours.

A last brief word about icons. Although St Paul uses the word "icon" to mean image, he is thinking in the sense that I mentioned earlier of a representation or symbol of the thing or person portrayed. However, in the orthodox tradition as it developed, the concept of a religious icon is somewhat more interesting – and I'm afraid my inner geek comes out here! We are familiar from traditional art with the idea of perspective in drawing – of vanishing points drawing the eye to a particular point. Most western art has followed this concept for centuries. But orthodox iconography follows a different conceptual pattern: that of reverse perspective. In western art, the viewer's gaze is directed to a point in the distance. In iconography, the viewer looks from that vantage point and looks out at the scene in the image. This is profoundly Christian in its outlook.

By his death and resurrection, Jesus invites us on the journey of discovery of faith – he invites us into the gift of the kingdom of God. This is at the heart of the spirituality of icons – we are invited to enter the mystery revealed to us in the image. For example, in the icon of the Trinity by Rublev, here on the left, we are welcomed to sit with the members of the Trinity – to be the fourth guest at the table. This privilege comes to us by faith and trust, and once we have accepted the invitation on the journey, all else pales into insignificance.