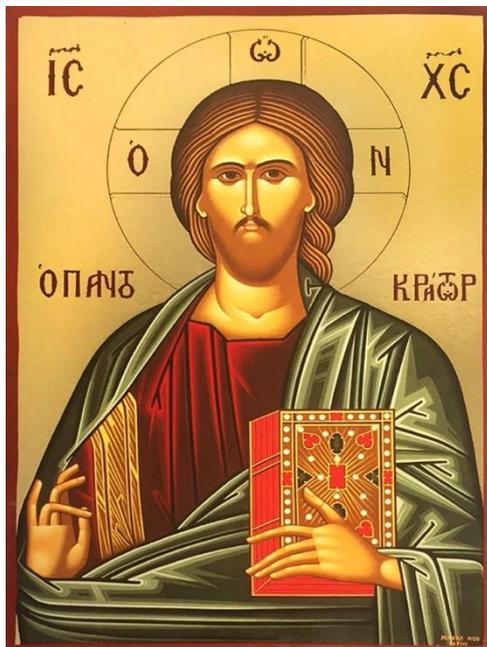


Introduction

A few days ago, I came across a surprising statistic: according to a leading online photography community, 10% of all the photos that have ever been taken anywhere in the world, were taken in the last 12 months. Clearly this is an unverifiable estimate, but that aside, it is undeniable that people across the world are taking billions of photos. We are obsessed with images, many of which are of ourselves – the infamous selfie. And, perhaps more to the point, we're choosing to share them. Apparently, Facebook hosts about 4% of all images ever created....But of course, in many ways this phenomenon is nothing new. Our digital age in which we can instantly create and share images is new, but humans have always made visual records of the things that matter to us, whether with cave paintings or self-portraiture, or other forms of art. Digital photographic images are a natural evolution from this. And why do we do this? A photo capturing an event, makes it feel like it actually 'happened' rather than it being just a fading memory, an image of a person reaffirms the identity of the subject. Sharing these images fulfils a desire to be known, to know others, and to create and deepen a sense of connectedness.

Icons as the image of God



When you arrived this morning you will have been given a copy of an image with your service sheet which I wanted to share with you. You will probably recognise it as an Orthodox icon of Christ, known as Christ Pantocrator, which means Christ, Creator and Ruler of All. It directly reflects and refers to the verses from Colossians in our epistle reading.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”

I was very fortunate to be introduced to iconography by someone known and loved by many of you, Canon Philip Lambert, formerly of this Cathedral of course. During my ordination training I spent a month of summer 2016 working on placement with him

when he was Chaplain of St Thomas Kefalas in Crete. He passed on his love of iconography to me and I share some of it with you now.

The image of Christ which you have before you may seem quite familiar, even if you haven't seen the icon before, and a little bit of history might explain why this is so. According to Orthodox tradition it isn't just the words of Jesus that were remembered and recorded as Scripture, some of the disciples who saw the face of Christ, painted it. Icons were therefore present from the life-time of Christ himself and have greatly influenced how we have depicted Christ ever since. The apostle Luke is reputed to be the first icon painter. No actual icons exist from this time but certainly icons dating back to the 6th and 7th Centuries can be found in the monastery of St Catherine at the base of Mount Sinai. Arguably such early icons may well bear a resemblance to the physical appearance of Christ, given their relatively close-proximity in time to his earthly life, and also the continuity that is maintained in these images, century after century. Christian truth has therefore from the beginning been conveyed to the world in word and image. For the Orthodox, the reason and justification for the existence of icons is the incarnation, Jesus the son of God, the Word made flesh, born into our midst. Icons of God are possible because God has become flesh and blood and is therefore tangible and visible and can be depicted as an image.

In the Pantocrator icon we see the face of Jesus Christ, but we see more than could be captured in a modern day digital photograph. Icons are often described as a window into eternity. They open-up pathways to the divine, suggesting a greater reality than is immediately obvious. This icon reveals who Jesus really is. We are face to face with the image of the invisible God, Jesus Christ, Saviour, God incarnate. True God and true man, the two made whole in one person.

Every line, colour and symbol of this icon is rich with meaning, which I can only touch on today. We are hoping that there will be some more opportunities for engaging with icons coming up at the Cathedral over the next few months, so please look out for those if you'd like to know more. But for now, I draw your attention to Christ's right hand raised in a gesture of blessing and teaching, pointing to the book of Gospels that he holds in his left hand, indicating that he reveals its truth to us, as we are drawn into deeper relationship with him, the image of the invisible God.

Image of God in us

Icons are described as looking at you, as much as you look at them. You may sense that as you look at Christ's face now. Face to face with Christ, possibilities open-up for us to discover who we are, created in his image as we are, that we might mirror his life.

Orthodox religious thought lays utmost emphasis on the image of God in the human person, an image which embraces the entire person, body as well as soul, this refers to Genesis 1 verse 26:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;

Sin has marred this likeness but it has not removed the image of God which remains present in each person. Christian discipleship enables us to move closer day by day, assisted by the grace of God, to the restoration of the full likeness of God within each of us. This is a beautiful and optimistic vision for humanity, believing it to be inherently good rather than characterised by sin and depravity as in some Christian thought, but it is realistic about human frailty too and recognises that human weakness accompanies the capacity for holiness, and human striving by itself is insufficient.

The implications for us

If we accept that every member of the human race bears the image of God and is therefore infinitely precious in God's sight then we cannot deny that this has serious implications for how we live our lives as Christians. 'When you see your brother or sister you see God' said Clement of Alexandria, a 2nd century theologian.

Later this week the Church of England's General Synod will be discussing a paper entitled 'Valuing People with Down's Syndrome'. The paper has been produced in response to concerns that the place within society of people with Down's and even their future existence is being brought into question due to the roll-out this year of a new pre-natal screening test within the NHS, known as Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing. Concerns have been prompted due to evidence from Iceland and Denmark where almost universal screening is already happening, that termination rates are now close to 100% and there is a real possibility that people with Down's syndrome will disappear from their populations. In Iceland, as few as 2 Down's babies are born per year now and even then usually because a test has been inaccurate.

The paper does not seek to deny the immense challenges facing parents when a Down's pregnancy is detected, nor to pass negative judgement on a decision to terminate the pregnancy. Rather, it is to ensure that full information is provided to parents about the high levels of support now available and the good quality of life that people with Down's may now expect, so that an informed decision can be made. The paper's aim is also to ensure that as Christians we help to nurture a society that recognises the image of God within each person, a society that values difference, cares for our weaker members and recognises our mutual dependence on each other as a key part of what makes us fully human.

Some years ago, I had short-term administrative job in a special school for profoundly disabled children in Northampton. I observed at close hand the pain and struggles of the parents and carers of the children. Many of the children had severe, life-limiting conditions needing 24-hour care. Some were completely immobile responding only with the slightest eye movements. But I also saw the great joy that the children brought to those who loved and cared for them. My narrow view of what constituted life in all its fullness was shattered and recreated, my humanity was enriched. In my short time at the school I learned much about the value of human life and how unique and precious to God each person is. These children, God's children, each one bearing his image, were beautiful and the impact they had on me was deep and profound as it was on everyone around them.

Jerome Lejeune, the French geneticist who discovered the chromosomal basis for Downs syndrome, sums this up well saying: "It cannot be denied that the price of these diseases is high — in suffering for the individual and in burdens for society. Not to mention what parents suffer! But we can assign a value to that price: It is precisely what a society must pay to remain fully human."

Conclusion

To be fully human is to bear the image of God. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. The God who made himself visible when he became flesh. Christ, born into our midst, as a fragile, vulnerable, dependent human being. Visible that he might reveal to us who God is, a God of love, tenderness and forgiveness, visible so that we might know him and grow more like him.

As we gaze on Christ's face in this icon,

his image reflected back in ours,
for now dimly and in part,
may we be prompted to more readily recognise his face in the face of others we meet,
enriching our humanity and moving us closer, little by little,
to that day when we will gaze on him face to face, restored in full to his likeness.

Amen