

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Image Of The Unseen

This is a powerful phrase which Paul uses today about Jesus: *he is the image of the unseen God*. *Image* translates the Greek word “eikon”. We know what an icon is: a sacred picture, made by a believer for believers, with the aim that it may be a focus of prayer. This has not always been seen as a valid form of religion. We recall the history of the Reformation, where the great heritage of English church painting and sculpture was practically eliminated in the name of Protestant purity; if we have longer memories, we may be able to reflect on the Iconoclastic Controversy, which possessed the Greek church over a hundred years. *Iconoclasm* means “image-breaking”; the Emperor Leo III decided that the Greeks’ love for their icons was preventing the conversion of Jews and Muslims; he declared all icons to be idols, and ordered their destruction. There was war, there were martyrdoms, bishops went into exile, the army became involved, and the theologians hurled anathemas at each other. It was no small issue for the Church. How can a mere picture become such a hot potato?

Jesus, Icon Of God

In Jesus of Nazareth, I believe, God transcended one of his own commandments. It’s against the first Commandment for a human being to invent an image of God, to worship it. But Jesus appeared in the world, and at that moment *we saw God*. It wasn’t that Jesus presented us with an image of God, which merely looked like him. Jesus looks like God because he is God. This is the overwhelming of the first Commandment with a truth that is new: you can now look at God, you can paint a picture of him. At moments of deepest insight, people *worshipped* Jesus. Humanity had found its icon of God, the unseen. How St John delighted to say this: *That which existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and which we held in our hands – the Word, who is life!* It becomes clear that since Jesus appeared (*epiphany*), everything has changed; the material world has suddenly become transparent to the divine, and *in Christ we see our God made visible*. This is a whole new way of looking! It is because Jesus became *flesh*, as Scripture says; from then on, the ultimate possibility for flesh is not to be Helen of Troy, or Alexander the Great, or any other great (but flawed) creature; *the fairest of the children of men* is the divine Son of God.

The Hinge Of Salvation

In this way the flesh of Jesus becomes the hinge of salvation, because a door opened in him which let physical reality meet God in reconciliation. If you have problems with physical reality – be it acne, hunger, pain, or death itself – you will see the central immensity of this mystery. When you want to know what the kingship of Christ means, look at the way his obedient body carried the love of God into the world: healing, feeding, revealing, teaching, proclaiming, raising the dead, above all accepting death to show us the endlessness of the gift he carried. The Transfiguration is our vision of this. John says: *We saw his glory, that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth!* If you can receive this revelation - that is, *see Christ* - and realise how it changes your bodily perspective, then it becomes possible to imagine a saved humanity that can be touched, and heard, and seen, watched *and worshipped*: an icon, in fact, of the unseen God.

In God’s Image

From the beginning, we are told, the image of God has lived in human nature. God made us *in his image*; and he made us male and female, so that we know how intimately we reflect him. It’s there in our bodily individuality, in our power to love, in our power to co-operate in Creation. But it is coupled in us with a life that imperfectly transmits the divine image. In Jesus it becomes finally proper for us to worship *God in human form*. We did not choose or create this image; it is God’s self-revelation to us. That he chose to do this in a body like ours means that in Jesus God shows us a vision of humanity at peace with his own divine life; This command of humanity is the fulness of royal power. For this reason we call Jesus the King of Creation. He is the teacher of the human family. All will seek at last to live in the peace of his realm.

Fr Philip