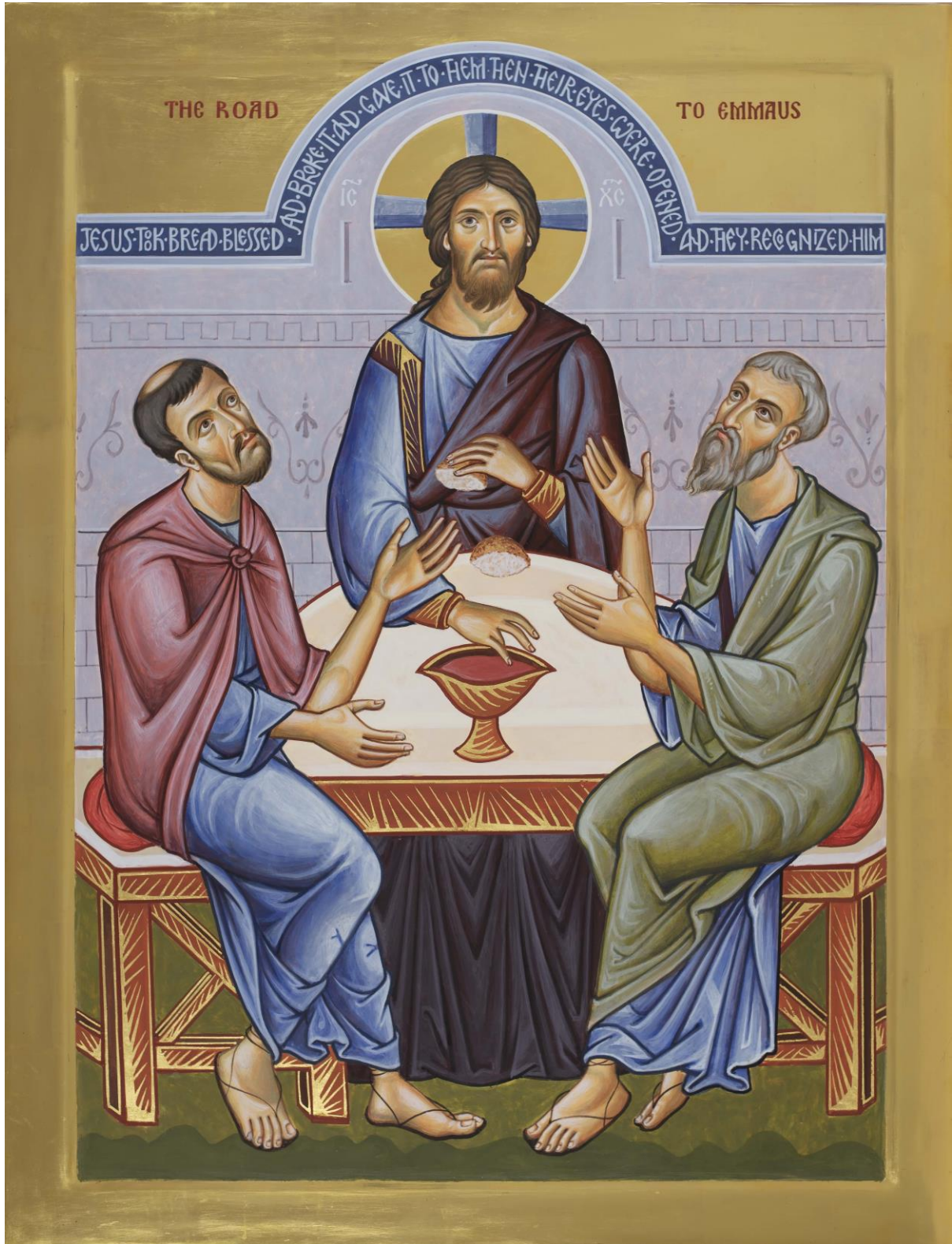


THE ICON OF THE ROAD TO EMMAUS, BY AIDAN HART:

AN EXPLANATION



The scriptural account: Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.¹⁷ And he said to them, ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad.¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’¹⁹ He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth,^[l] who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’²⁵ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah^[i] should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us^[k] while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Image and Word

Image and word complement one another, but do not repeat one another. Although words can explain spiritual truths with detail in a way that images cannot, images can crystalize the most important themes and suggest surprising angles of interpretation. In this article we shall consider some of the spiritual truths imbedded in this icon’s design.

We can read the full story in Luke 24:13-35. On the Sunday of the resurrection two disciples were walking on the road to Emmaus, discussing with incredulity the stories they had heard of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus drew alongside them but they did not recognize Him at first. He asked what they were discussing, and then explained to them how Christ’s suffering and resurrection had been foretold by the prophets. As they drew near Emmaus the disciples urged Christ to stay with them. It is what happens next that the icon depicts: ‘When He was at the table with them, He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him’ (verses 30, 31).

Although this event at Emmaus was not the Eucharist proper, there are elements of it that offer deep insight into the Eucharist, and it these insights on which the icon concentrates.

Unity and distinction: the circle and the triangle

The figures are arranged within a circle but also within a triangle. The circle indicates the union we have with Christ through partaking of His Body and Blood, while the triangle affirms that we retain our distinction and uniqueness within this union. Christ is Christ, Cleopas is Cleopas, and Luke is Luke (by tradition the second disciple is Luke, who wrote the account). Union with Christ requires the laying aside of egotistical individualism, which is isolation and death, but it also manifests the unique calling and character of each person. In Revelation 2:17 we read: 'To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.' This name is unique, and reflects our personhood.

Gods by grace: the colours

This union in distinction is also suggested by the colours of the garments. They all have blue, which represents divinity, and yet each also has a uniquely coloured outer garment. The Church Fathers teach us that Christ is God by nature and human by grace, while the Christian is human by nature and bears God by grace. In the words of the Apostle Peter: 'His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:3,4).

So Christ's coming is not just to save us from sin but is ultimately to bring us into unity with Him, something even beyond what Adam and Eve had before their fall. In the graphic words of St Athanasius the Great: 'The Word was made flesh in order that we might be made gods. ... Just as the Lord, putting on the body, became a man, so also we men are both deified through his flesh, and henceforth inherit everlasting life.'

Christ's outer garment is an earth red, for He united His divinity (the blue) to our earthy humanity (His red outer garment) that He might make our humanity partake in His divinity. Church Fathers make it clear that this is a unity without confusion. It is a communion of free persons and not a melting pot. We are human by nature and God-bearers by grace, but the divine and human natures in us remain distinct as well as united. We bear the blue of divinity, but we remain free to live by this divine power or not to live by it. And so the coloured garments are on the same person, but remain distinct, blue and green, blue and red.

Faces and relationship

In English, Greek and Latin the word person also means face (person, *prosopon*, *persona*). The face is for communion, to hear the other, to see the other, to listen to the other, to communicate with the other. So personhood is fulfilled in communion, in love, in outgoing sacrifice. Luke and Cleopas are looking at Christ and in doing this they find clarity and revelation and joy: 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He was talking to us on the road', they said to each other after He had disappeared.

In the Orthodox Church icons are understood not as pictures of past events, but as a door to Christ and His saints. In our icon Christ looks out at us. He is present with us now, looking at us as through a door. Although the Road to Emmaus is an historical event of the past, it is also a present reality each time we partake together at the Lord's table.

This sense of the Lord looking at us through the icon helps explain the perspective systems used in icons. Some people mistakenly say that icons do not use perspective. Icons do use perspective, but different systems, up to six in fact. One is sometimes called 'inverse perspective'. By this they mean that instead of all the lines meeting at a point on the horizon behind the icon, as for example in Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper, the lines meet in front of the icon, in you the viewer. The icon is not just an image of me looking at an event; it is also an event where Christ is looking me. We contemplate the icon, but the icon also shows God contemplating us.

Their eyes were opened

When you see someone you know you are with them, and close enough to see them.

Although Luke and Cleopas had been walking with Christ, Luke tells us that ‘their eyes were kept from recognizing him’. It was only at the breaking of the bread that their eyes were opened. It is this point that the icon depicts.

The Greek word here translated as ‘kept’ means to hold or restrain. It seems that Christ initially kept Luke and Cleopas from recognizing Him so that He could explain things to them without them being overwhelmed by His presence. It was precisely at the point that they understood and believed His explanation of the Scriptures that they could see Him, partake of the blessed bread, and thus have communion.

This is why the first part of the Divine Liturgy is the teaching of the word. It is only after we have heard the words and commands of God and believe and obey them that we are ready to receive God, to see Him and be united to Him. If it were possible to see and be united to God without this preparation, we would in fact be destroyed by His divinity. We are called to be a bush ‘burning but not consumed’.

The Eucharist is not magic. It is free participation in God’s life, and it only works for our good inasmuch as we first hear God’s word and believe and act on it.

And so it is that our icon brings together the receiving of the blessed bread (communion) with spiritual revelation. ‘In Your light shall we see light’. ‘The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.’ (1 Cor. 2:14).

The significance of seeing helps explain why icons do not show people in profile or with their backs turned – only sinful or secondary characters are sometimes shown this way. We are called for relationship, to see one another, and the icon shows the world in its restored state of communion. Hell is to be together with our backs turned to one another, while heaven is to face one another and behold one another.

The communion table

The three are seated in a semicircle. This shape is both intimate and open. Being in a circle the three are a complete unit. And yet there is also an open space in the front that invites others into this intimacy. Even if just three are present in the Eucharist, the whole Church is present. On the other hand, this is not a closed communion, but invites all to come who wish to follow Christ.

This same ‘horseshoe’ shape is found in the Pentecost icon. In the centre is usually shown an old man called cosmos. He represents the whole world invited into the communion of the Body of Christ

But Pentecost was not just a time to empower the disciples to preach the Good News. It was the ultimate spiritual initiation of the disciples. It was the time at which they were granted permanent union with God. Pentecost was when they became Spirit bearers. It was when their eyes were fully opened because they were in the Spirit.

Every Eucharist is also a Pentecost. In the Epiclesis we call down the Spirit not just upon the gifts but also upon us, the congregation. In the Orthodox Church the epiclesis prayer is: ‘Send down Your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here offered’.

The hands

It took a long time to design the icon so that the hands fitted in a meaningful way into the small space available. The general plan of the icon was inspired by a twelfth-century mosaic in Monreale, Sicily, but the narrower dimensions of the icon panel required that I change some of the hand gestures.

To make the connection between the Emmaus meal and the Eucharist I included a cup of wine, which Christ is blessing along with the bread. Luke gestures towards Christ to suggest

that moment when his eyes are opened and he recognises Christ. He also gestures towards the chalice, for it is through participating in the Blood of Christ that we see and know Christ. Cleopas raises his right hand in recognition of Christ and his left hand points towards the bread. It was through the breaking and blessing of the bread that Cleopas, and us, truly know Christ.

Christ breaks the bread. It is not sufficient for us, or Him, just to look at it. Looking by itself can be passive. Hands break the bread. And the bread is not just broken. It is also eaten, participated in. This returns us to our theme of the face. The face is for communion, for going beyond ourselves towards the other.



Mosaic of the Road to Emmaus, Monreale, Sicily, c. 1180.

Light

There is no shadow as such in icons, or at least no shadows created by one single external source of light (a painterly technique called *chiaroscuro*). Icons show people and the world aflame with God's presence, filled with and surrounded by light. God is all around, sustaining all things regardless of whether or not they love Him. This is what the gold background stands for. It is not so much a background as the ocean of God's love in which all things 'live and move and have their being'.

But the saints also have haloes. For them God is not just a sustaining power without, but He dwells within them. Through their faith and love they have invited the Spirit to dwell within them. The Holy Spirit radiates out from within their being.

So why then do not Luke and Cleopas have haloes? It is usual for icons not to depict the disciples with haloes until Pentecost, for it is at that point that they received the Spirit, Who then abides within them forever.

Sitting

At first the disciples walk with Christ, an active thing. Then they sit with Christ. Both eastern and western Church Fathers speak of three stages on the spiritual life: purification, illumination, and union. In the east these are sometimes called practical theology, natural theology and mystical theology. The first phase is active repentance, where by God's help we align our will with God's. This active stage is represented by the disciples walking with Christ, beginning to see what they must believe and do.

This purification or practical theology prepares us for the second phase where we begin to see God active in the world. This corresponds to the blessing of the bread, when the disciples' eyes are opened or illumined. The bread is no longer mere bread, but a gift and manifestation of Christ's love. And then there is finally participation or union, when we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ.

This icon is not therefore complete in itself. It brings us through phase one and phase two – purification and illumination. But the final phase of union or mystical theology is for the congregation to complete by partaking of the Eucharist. The icon brings us to a threshold, and then invites us to step over that threshold and enter union with Christ through partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ with faith and love.