**THE TRIUMPH OF ORTHODOXY St John 1:43 - 51**

Some years ago in the depths of winter my wife and I visited the area of central Turkey which is called Kappadokia (Cappadocia) whose geographical centre is Kaisari (Caesarea) where in the 4th century St Basil the Great was archbishop from 370-379. The landscape of the area is hilly and irregular since it is basically tufa caused by many volcanic eruptions over thousands of years. There are few open flat areas. It was the first time we had stayed in a hotel in a cave with a jacuzzi and it was very cosy despite the blue skies and near zero temperature outside. Almost everybody lives in a cave which is easily cut out of the porous rock and the churches or chapels are in caves too. In the small town where we stayed there was a former monastic dwelling with many of these and some were painted magnificently, celebrating the Lord and the great saints of his Church. Others were stark with no human depictions just geometric lines and drawings rather akin to the experience of being in a mosque. The contrast between the two could not have been more striking and brought home to us the effects of the issue of the iconoclastic debate and how far the two sides, the iconodules and the iconoclasts, were separated from each other. If we read through Byzantine history of the period from 730 to 843 we can notice the bitterness of the rivalry which often led to violence and death on both sides as emperors supported one side or the other. The issue was definitively settled when St John of Damascus stated that, since God had taken on flesh and had assumed a material existence, it was right to honour him with material things. Theodora, the wife of the departed Emperor Justinian, on behalf of their son Michael III restored the veneration of icons in the Orthodox Church on 11th March 843. Today we celebrate this feast on the first Sunday of Lent known as the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

Perhaps at the heart of the veneration of the icons is the positive attitude to the material world which is waiting to be transfigured. St Paul says in his epistle to the Romans, “The whole creation is groaning in travail” and “The creation will be set free from its bondage to decay”. In other words it is like a baby in the final stages of pregnancy waiting to be born. There are already signs of this coming liberty in the icon where the natural elements of wood, paint and gold are transfigured into something holy or ‘set apart’ which is the origin of the word. St Gregory Palamas calls this holy property ‘divine energies’. It is a power to affect what is around it. It is attested to by how an icon painter prepares him or herself inwardly with fasting and prayer to the saint or holy person to be depicted and especially for guidance and to be present somehow in the icon. That power in the icon can manifest itself in different ways.

About twenty years ago I Ied a pilgrimage to the monastery of Diveyevo not far from Sarov where St Seraphim’s body now lies after being recovered from the Museum of Atheism in Moscow. One day we were driven to a skete of the monastery where an elderly Ukrainian widow looked after a number of teenage girls who were living there. I noticed a large impressive icon of the saint on the wall of the skete chapel with a disc on the glass and asked the lady what it signified. She replied that it testified to its miraculous properties and then began to recount an incident which had happened not many years earlier. In winter the monastery had been cut off by snow which fell to a depth of 3 metres. One of the girls in the community had developed an abscess in her mouth which was extremely painful and required drugs and surgery. Her situation deteriorated but the skete was unapproachable. One evening during the service the young girl witnessed the saint stepping down from the icon, walking across the floor of the chapel, touching her cheek and walk back to his icon. Nobody else saw what happened but the girl was instantly healed.

The power of the icon is not only one of healing. It can change fundamentally a person’s direction in life. I have mentioned before how I experienced this power when as a student I saw an icon of the Theotokos being paraded at a feast in the tiny village of Nea Roda near Mount Athos. This experience led me to question everything I had been told to believe about the Mother of God and the saints and to direct myself towards the teaching of the Orthodox Church into which I was subsequently received here in this church with Tuija, my wife. Was I wrong in my earlier belief as a Protestant Anglican? No, I prefer to say that I was impoverished.

The icon then is evangelistic. It shows the beauty and power of the Gospel and complements the written word. What the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787 discussed and which was finally accepted and ratified by the whole Church in 843 and the Fathers have stressed is that the icon is like a kind of door opening onto the hidden world of God. It does not point to itself as an end in itself as some have argued wrongly branding it as a graven image. It opens towards God from us and in the opposite direction from Him towards us and the created order.

Christ himself was the icon of God to us. That is why he can say, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me”? We too are icons. You have probably heard the saying that a person cannot become a monk until he has seen the face of Christ on at least one person in his life. Some time ago I watched the TV series called the Pilgrimage about disparate groups of people, some relatively famous, who go on a pilgrimage together and discuss life and personal belief with one another as they walk. On one such pilgrimage the group stopped at a chapel in a forest in a fairly isolated part of Serbia and were hosted by a young solitary nun. One of the pilgrims asked her where she had found God and decided to devote her life to Him. To his utter astonishment she replied, “In Essex”. I leave you to do the detective work.

As icons of Christ it is also our calling to be transfigured to his likeness and to show that image in our own humble way wherever we are called to be to those around us and to the created world, our brother, which we have as his caretaker. As we continue through the Fast let us pray that with God’s help we may become like the icon painter’s brush and reveal that hidden state of beauty which He has created in all of us.

***Oxford 9th March 2025***