



Circuit Ministers Message. September 6th, 2020. To gaze at Jesus and see as he sees.

It is just over 12 months since I was in Bulgaria partly to reconnect with the Methodist Church in the country and partly to spend some concentrated time looking at Icons. One of my memories is of seeing a street seller near the sea front with a table selling all sorts of (copied) Icons. As I looked at the goods, I was drawn to a small one (pictured here) known as '**Christ-The Pantocrator**' (**Lord of Creation or Ruler of all**) I was drawn to it because of the warm colours, the light and the shaded area in it and of the gaze of Jesus.

When we see friends or family after a time apart (perhaps even more so this year) we enjoy seeing each other and perhaps we take a photo/selfie. At home and work there are likely to be places where we keep such photos. Humans are the only creatures that make visual records of the things that matter to us. One way of describing the church is to say it is a community of memory. The very words said as bread and wine is consecrated '*Do this in memory/remembrance of me*' remind us we are doing something symbolic in a *visual* and verbal way. In the Pantocrator Icon we see the face of Jesus Christ, but as Jim Forest in his book *Praying with Icons* puts it "*we see more than could be photographed had a camera existed two thousand years ago. **We are face to face with the Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, God incarnate, whose touch or word heals the blind, raises the dead and drives out demons.***" **We are face to face with his healing and compassion, and also his rigorous demands.**

Rowan Williams says in his book '*The Dwelling of the light*': "*What we see is Jesus of Nazareth, a human figure in modest, not royal or priestly clothing; a recognizable human face and figure. Although this human being, like any human being, is vulnerable to what happens in history (and the cross in the halo reminds us of just what that means) this human being Jesus is in every moment, even in the deepest vulnerability, acting out the act of God.*" To confront Jesus is to confront eternal truth. If like Pontius Pilate, we ask 'What is truth?' the answer is before us: 'He is.' This Icon is a kind of visual translation of the Gospel of John, where Jesus again and again says about himself the divine words 'I am.'

The fingers of the right hand look as if they are blessing-and that is not completely wrong. But originally, in classical art, such gestures were meant to identify someone engaged in teaching. Almost as if Jesus is saying 'Pay attention, look and listen!' In Jesus' left hands we see an open book. The texts are often from John's Gospel- '*I am the Light of the world*' although Matthew 11:28 "*Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden*" is also common. The iconographer will normally choose the text according to the need and circumstance of those who will contemplate it, and this can be a challenge to prayerful discernment for the painter. Reflecting on this icon can perhaps help us in our reading and understanding of the Bible. We do not read the Bible as a mere record or as an oracle divorced from the presence of Christ. Rather, we read it asking him to show us in our reading the truth of ourselves and God once again. **Perhaps you could look at this picture of Jesus as you read this Sunday's set readings (Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20; Psalm 119:33-40) or as you read a Bible passage which means a lot to you?**

In this new Methodist year we may feel uncertain and blown off course, but remember when we are **Face to face with Jesus, there and only there, do we find Who We are.** We have been created to mirror his life. Think on that as you look at this picture of Christ. When we look at Jesus looking back at us, we see both what we were made to be, bearers of the Divine image and likeness, and what we have made of ourselves. Where do his eyes lead us? To our own deepest reality, to the loving self-communication of God which is at the heart of our existence and which by laziness, shortcomings, and forgetfulness we often deny. But remember the ending of Charles Wesley's hymn, '*Jesu, lover of my soul*': '*Spring thou up within my heart, Rise to all eternity.*' His gaze upon us takes us to the constant love of the creator (God) We see what Jesus sees, what the Son of God sees in looking at the Father. **To see the world as Jesus and God see it is a good place to start.**

God Bless you.

(If you want to see my full written reflection on this Icon, please contact me)

Rev. Peter. On behalf of Rev Ann, Rev Nicola, Rev Robert & Deacon Sam.