

St Andrew Holborn: Prayer before an icon.

April 26th 2006

Tonight we share in focusing upon the image of the crucified and risen Lord in the great icon before us in this church. We do so in the knowledge that the image of Christ is a part of a joint venture of prayer linking this church of St. Andrew in the City of London with the Monastery of Vallecchiara in Rome.

So to begin with this portrayal of Jesus Christ comes from the heart of a community of prayer whose adventure with this community began last year in a Mission to London. An icon is a painted image depicting a biblical scene and designed to lead those who see it inwards towards God. The icon itself is born in prayer and as each brush stroke and colour is applied so an act of faith undergirds the visual action.

Though this Christ is based upon previous similar figures it is unique and personal to this church and can never be repeated. It comes out of a sharing in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is based upon St. John's Gospel, Chapter 19 verses 16 – 29. The cross itself is black almost in mourning, the whole is dominated by a gigantic figure of Jesus and streaming from his hands and feet is his life blood. Surrounding all is a field of Gold turning the darkness into glory.

Covering the central part of the figure is a white and black linen draped material marked at the edge with black and red stripes; the prayer shawl of a Jewish man now covering the young Rabbi from Nazareth.

On his left side and his right are his mother Mary and the evangelist St. John. They take position of prayer: Our Lady looks up to her son with hope, St John rests his head in his hand in sorrow and expectation. At the Lord's feet are the rock of Golgotha and as a symbol of death the skull reminds us that Golgotha is the "Place of the skull".

Above the sacred head is written the inscription put there by Pontius Pilate, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. And then right at the top of the whole cross two angels support the risen Lord who reigns in glory and whose right hand is shown in blessing. So in one icon the whole story of the crucified and risen saviour is told.

It is this image that I want you to concentrate on as we pray together and it is the crucified Jesus that becomes our Lord's Prayer as we think and pray the pattern prayer for all Christians.

I would like you to be as comfortable as possible to pray this prayer tonight. So whatever provides you with most comfort please find that position. Now, it might be sitting, leaning, kneeling, standing whatever relaxes you do it now!

As we pray each section of the Lord's Prayer we will look at a part of the icon and allow our eyes to travel from top to bottom as we say each phrase of the prayer. We begin:

- **Our Father who art in heaven.** We look at the image at the very top of the icon of the risen Christ supported by two angels and thank God for the gift of life and death. Lord you come from heaven and you return to heaven, take us with you Lord. Hold us in your arms and save us Lord.
- **Hallowed by your name.** Your name is nailed to the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". The Jews would have it changed to, "he said he was the King of the Jews".

Pilate said “what I have written I have written”. Lord you are King not only of the Jews but of the whole world, make us worthy to share in your kingdom Save your world.

- **Your kingdom come, your will be one, on earth as it is in heaven.** As we gaze on your head we see the place where the crown of thorns rested, but in their place is a crown of light, a halo. And look at the face, the brow turned up the eyebrows turned down the eyes closed in resignation but not showing pain, rather acceptance and entirely at one with his father; all is now in his hands. It is a strong face and as it leans to the right it marks the rhythm of the figure dancing to the tune of God as the torso moves to the left and the legs turn again away from the body to the right. It is a pattern of prayer almost like the rhythm of breathing in and out. Be in our rhythm of life and in our breathing Lord.
- **Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.** As your vision moves away from the head and looks left and right the arms stretch out to the hands freely open in acceptance and blessing. And pulsing from the centre of each hand the life blood of Jesus Christ. “This is my body this is my blood”, it is as if the promise of the Last Supper begins on the cross. These are the hands used for healing and blessing for service and work now destroyed by nails and driven through with pain. Lord forgive us for the pain we inflict on each other, remember your world in pain.
- **Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.** And so the eye moves down over the linen prayer shawl, on down the twisted legs to the feet pointing downwards. These feet have trod the land of Israel, crossed and criss-crossed the desert and the coastal routes calling people back to God in repentance. Pouring from the feet is the life blood poured out for us and falling down to the lowest point onto the rocks of Golgotha and into the skull itself. It symbolises that Jesus descended into the lowest place in order to carry all the departed back to his father in heaven, no one, nothing will be lost, all is saved.
- **For thine is the Kingdom the power and the glory for ever and ever, Amen.** And as we travel back up the body of Jesus from the feet to the head we see that his kingdom is not of this world it is of the life of the spirit. When we gaze on this power we see it is not the power of men, but the power of the spirit of life. When we contemplate this glory it is a different glory from our glory it is to be found in a crown of thorns, nails and a cross of wood. Here is real glory.

And then and only then do we realise that this cross is none other than the throne of our Christ here on Golgotha, here at the cross is the resurrection, the battle is won here. Not in the grave but here outside as city wall, in Jerusalem, the crucified Jesus is the crowned king. The stone of the sepulchre is rolled away not to let Jesus Christ out, but to let us in. Dare you enter?

In gesso and natural paints and wood and gilt in this **Vallechiara cross** is the way of salvation? The icon is a sacrament itself, God dwells in wood and paint and image and colour, and he is to be found at the heart of creative humanity. Here a little bit of Rome in London, a little bit of London in Rome. Bind our hearts and minds together in the one Lord, in the one faith, in the one church and in the one love or Jesus Christ.

O saviour of the world who in your passion brought humankind to the foot of the cross and into the grave and risen in the garden, save us and help us good Lord. Amen

Ven Peter Delaney; Archdeacon of London