

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 2 JANUARY 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Romans 6:1-14; John 3: 1-17

"Birth and Re-birth"



During Advent and Christmas at St. Aidan's we let ourselves be guided by this Icon. It is a beautiful Icon, speaking to us of the mystery of Christmas. Icons are not just images, they are visual sermons, written to inspire and support people of faith and enrich them with deeper insight and understanding of the stories of scripture. They go deep into the mystery of faith that lies behind the spoken or the written word, and reach into the soul at a level verbal communication cannot.

To achieve this, Icon imagery is different. The figures, gaze out at us and look us full in the face, unflinching, confronting us. They have large, almond-shaped eyes that catch ours and won't let go. The enlarged ears, long thin noses and small mouths indicate that each of those sensory organs has been changed by receiving of the Divine Grace. It is therefore sanctified and has ceased to be the usual biological organ. Because they have been touched by the divine, the people in the Icon look different from us. And their story tells us how and why they changed.

Icon painting, or writing, deliberately disregards the principle of natural perspective. Instead, giving the impression of complete flatness, it reverses perspective. Multiple points of view are placed in front of the painting, not behind it, which results in the viewer of the Icon being drawn into the picture and made part of it. Instead of tapering off into the distance, as much western art does, the picture moves towards you and includes you in it. In addition to the inverted perspective, icon writing uses what is called psychological perspective: the most important figure in the composition is the largest and centrally placed. The viewer's attention is drawn to it from the outside in, from what is smaller, around the margins of the picture, into what is central at the centre. The margins often offering a commentary on what is in the middle.

Walls of houses, of a church, a palace, or city are indicated in the background. In this way they are made to "uncover" the essence of the event and give due to the participants instead of drawing away the attention to detail that is not central to the main action. Since icon painting is not realistic, it shows no natural source of light and does not represent shadows. The only light in icons is the inner light of sacred figures and the divine light of Christ.

Icon painting has the ability to represent several moments of the same action (story) on one panel. In the scene of the Nativity we can see not only the birth itself, but also the arrival of the Magi, the shepherds spreading the good news, Joseph being tempted by the devil, and even the servant women washing the baby. This functions like a cylindrical story board or cartoon: it takes the viewer deeper into the action by going round from the outside in. Then it will, by leading the viewer from the central action out again, provide him or her with further detail and elucidation leading to a more comprehensive overview and understanding.

That's what we will do today: We will move into the central action of the Icon from the outside in to seek understanding of what, according to the Icon writer is at the heart of the story of Christmas. Then we will move back out again to a general and hopefully more comprehensive overview and understanding of the mystery this Icon depicts and the message it seeks to convey to people of faith.

But before we start with that I'd like to draw your attention to a few more things I think are important to know about Icon writing. Icons are products of prayer and meditation, involving a process of deep and faithful reflection of the subject matter by the "writer" of the Icon.

The "paint" used is always egg tempera, this is not only because of colour and stability of the material, but because egg represents resurrection and new life. All pigments used are natural - symbolising that the whole creation is present. The writing is done from dark to light, filling in the contours with dark colours first and gradually adding lighter colours and finishing with the deep shine and reflective surface of gold leaf. This symbolises the journey of creation from darkness to light, from being lost in darkness to seeing oneself in the reflection of God's golden light of mercy. Like scripture these images don't change, they come from a continuous tradition of the visual representation of "the word" that goes back centuries. The artist or age is not important, because it is, in essence, God self reaching out to the soul of whoever looks at the Icon and opens their heart in faith.

Looking at an Icon one always starts with a conscious effort to open one's heart to the voice of the divine speaking through it into the situation of one's own life, at this point in time, in this place. To let inspiration and interpretation work and make your faith and understanding grow through the visual representation of the scripture one is presented with. The Icon calls on you to open your heart so you can hear what the Icon may have to say to you, to allow it to draw you into itself and see where you fit in, where you recognise yourself, what part of it you identify with and where it calls you to follow on, and up, what it has to tell you.

We start at the right hand, bottom corner. What is depicted there is the baptism of Jesus. This is where the gospel of Mark starts: not with a nativity, not with the wise men from the east, but with Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. Jesus' baptism as depicted in the Icon is not at the Jordan, but in a font, with women looking after him. It reminds us how Jesus' baptism set us an example that has been followed ever since the earliest beginnings of the Church. Each and every one of us dies and rises again with Christ when we are dunked into the waters of the font, taking on his life and his name, as we become part of his community.

In the left hand bottom corner we see Joseph. He is deep in thought and looking away from the Christ child. He is drawn into himself, with a man in a rough goats skin whispering in his ear. It is Satan who is addressing him, the feet that would betray him hidden in soft leather boots. "Come on Joseph, get a life! The Holy Spirit she said? Doing the right thing and marry her to protect her and the child? Why on earth would you? Sowing the seeds of doubt, Satan tries to wreak havoc where he can. Joseph is regarded as the weakest link, a point of entry from where he can work some mischief. If only for the fun of it. Satan doesn't mind who or what, as long as whatever it is will put a spanner in the wheels of God's work. Most of us will know that voice all too well. Trying to tempt us away from what is right and good. Working in our hearts to turn us away from where light and life can be found.

As we move up we see the wise men. Climbing mountains on their long and arduous journey to find the Christ. They connect Jesus with the prophecies of old, about the nations coming to the mountain of the Lord to worship, of all the earth gathering to praise and share of their abundance at the table God will set for them when the Messiah comes. Come, they say, follow us, be guided by his light, gather at the table, the journey may be arduous, but it will take you to where an abundance of grace and truth is made available to the world. To a place where wholeness and fulfillment will embrace you with its love.

Above them the angels rejoice and sing their songs of praise. On the right hand side one is bending

over to deliver the message to the shepherd in the fields of Bethlehem: I bring good tidings of gladness and joy! Heaven and earth connect, heaven is bursting with the news and on the dark fields of Bethlehem it finds open hearts that will receive it. Asking you if your heart is open and ready to hear the song of the angels when it comes to wherever you are.

In the middle the divine light shines down from heaven and connects to the heart of the picture. Three rays, representing the trinity, connect heaven and earth. They split the rocks. It's as if the inside of the earth itself opens and gives birth.

The shepherds on the right hand side are on their way immediately, their journey shorter and less arduous than the journey of the wise men on the other side, by the looks of it. They play the flute, sing songs and bring their sheep along. What will your journey be like? Easy like theirs? Or long and arduous like the journey of the wise men? How will you find the light of God? Singing and skipping along the road or labouring up hill via a long and circuitous route? The shepherds remind us of King David, and the shepherd king the scriptures have been looking forward to for centuries. A king who looks after his people like a shepherd after his flock and has that simple open channel communication with the heavens we find depicted in the top right hand corner.

How does your life and leadership compare with that image? Do you recognise yourself in those shepherds and the ancient imagery attached to them? Or are you in need of the true shepherd to lead you and guide you, so you will find the green pastures and babbling waters of a deep and peaceful faith?

Where do you fit in, what person or figure or situation do you identify with?

Is it with the women who wash the baby in the font? Who care for the Christ child, and look after him? Or is it with the baby himself, dying and rising to new life with him as you follow Christ in your life? Being born again, not once, but many times over? Or do you feel closer to Joseph and his doubts? To the person who has to somehow hold it all together, regardless of all the question marks and uncertainties in his mind, regardless of his personal pride and rational sense of what is right and proper. Following his heart. Giving more than could be reasonably asked of him. Loving his wife and this baby, and taking responsibility even where others will tell him nobody could blame him for opting out and finding an easier life somewhere. Perhaps yours is the journey of the wise men, toiling uphill, for miles and miles and miles. Not too sure where you will end up, with only a ray of light to go on.

And what about the angels? Have you ever reached that point in prayer or song where you felt the heavens open, where your heart soared and you became part of the angels' song? You may have, and know of the power of revelation, of understanding and insight, of light opening up the darkness to allow you a glimpse of something beyond the day to day of our ordinary lives. Or perhaps it's the shepherds. Skipping all the way to Bethlehem, looking after whatever sheep God has given you to look after, joining in heavenly music where you can find yourself able to, witnessing to your faith to whomever there may be to share it with.

Most probably you will recognise something of your own journey of faith in them all. Faithfully caring, tempted and doubting, traveling a long steep path through life, hearing the angels at times, catching a glimpse of the light here and there, and finding your way across the fields to what is in the centre of our picture where the mountains recede into the background and from the darkness emerges a child into the light.

The image in the middle shows us the scene as set by the writer of Luke: a babe in a manger, born

on the road with no means to ascertain comfort and safety. It is a double image. There is not only a child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. The child is also a man, wrapped in the linens of burial, placed on an altar for sacrifice. The cave not only a stable but a tomb. The light from above touches the head of the child, breaking into the darkness of the cave to tell us how in this person heaven and earth connect and the light of God begins to shine. At the same time it touches the man bound by death, breaking open the tomb.

Christ however, child or man, is not the centre of the Icon. Mary is. It is her we are invited most of all to identify with. It is Mary who gives birth to the Christ child. Mary who protects him, guards him, cares for him. In front of the entry to the cave she lies, the colour of her garments the brown of earth and the blue of heaven. She bears the fruit of heaven on earth. She brings this child, in whom humanity as the image of God is restored into the world. She shows us, more than any of the others in the picture, what faithful living is like. It is receiving the word, opening yourself up and then giving birth to it in your life. Letting wholeness grow in your care, guarding it, protecting it, nurturing it. Letting God enter into the life of those around you. Be they simple shepherds or important kings. Trust those who barely trust themselves with the secrets and treasures you have been entrusted with. Drawing others into the circle so they too can be part of the nurturing and caring that needs to be done.

The Eastern Tradition teaches that at the fall the image of God in humanity was shattered and that in Christ that image was made whole again. That following Christ is about restoring that image in us, bringing his wholeness to birth so our life is renewed and the world recreated. Bringing the Christ to birth in our life. A good place to start the year I would think. With the message that receiving God's Spirit will enable us to bring new life to birth in ourselves and in the world around us. That we can be born anew to what God meant us to be in the first place: people mirroring his love if we follow in the footsteps of Christ. With the song of the angels and their glad tidings of joy and peace in our ears, urging us to take over their song and sing it all the way to where we, ourselves, will meet Christ in our lives. By getting ourselves ready to meet Christ and follow where he has travelled before us without fear or hesitation. To close our ears to the whisperings of the devil and turn around to where we can see the light splitting the darkness. To care, for what is of Christ, in our own lives and in that of others, nurture it and support it where we can. So this world and all who are in it can be born again to new life. Amen.