

Icons and Glory

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Name your three best friends, and then name the three nations that you most admire. This test for self-knowledge generally reveals the discrepancy between the truly significant others in our lives and what we esteem as the great and glorious nations. Generally, the three most significant and dear persons in our lives are not particularly wealthy, or powerful or prestigious, or from 'superior' ethnic backgrounds. Yet still we persist in identifying *glory* with manifest *power*, a fact which underscores the urgent need for Christians to recapture a proper understanding of 'glory', now almost obscured by the modern secular notion of power. For surely it is our Christian conviction that the glory of God has been revealed in the poverty of Christ?

God speaks his word of hope and love in human images (in Greek *eikones*—'icons'), sacraments or 'efficacious signs' which move our hearts and enlighten our minds. We cannot do what we cannot at least in some way imagine or envision. We cannot believe, hope and love—our most significant 'doing'—without enabling images ('icons', in other words) or sacraments. We cannot perform the deeds of faith and hope and love without the living icons that constitute orientations to action. The Eternal Word of God became flesh in the perfect image of God that is Jesus Christ, in order to transform all human hearts and minds, enabling us through the gift of his Spirit to love God above all and our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus Christ and his Church are the sacrament or efficacious sign of God's creative and sustaining and predestining activity in the universal human story, making possible our responding love and faith and hope in God. The Christian community affirms that it has seen or experienced the 'glory' of God in his perfect image Jesus Christ, for the glory is the impact of God's active presence transforming our lives.

God's glory is manifest wherever and whenever we experience the transforming power of his goodness. The beauty of God's perfect image in Jesus Christ, according to the Greek Fathers, redeemed us by its transforming power. The personal beauty of the friends of God is the glory of God, the divine *kabod Yahweh*. The community of Christian faith has seen God's glory in Jesus Christ and continues to see it in the living icons, signs and sacraments of his Spirit operative among us in the words and deeds of faith and hope and love.

It is important that we have a true image of ourselves, of others and of God, for our images determine how we think and feel and act. The Christian image of God in the crucified Christ radically distinguishes Christianity from all other religions by a unique way of thinking and feeling and acting with regard to oneself, others and God. The crucified and risen Christ is the image of God's unquenchable or undying love for everyone, transforming our image of self and others into that of friends, sons and daughters. The song title 'You're Nobody until Somebody Loves You' implicitly articulates the meaning of the Christian image of ourselves and God; the image of the crucified Christ enables us to envision ourselves and all others as the recipients of God's all-embracing, integrating, cosmos-creating love, sharing the same origin and ground and destiny. God is ever 'in touch' with us through his living images.

The Church employs its Scriptures as the basis for responding love to the One who has first shown love to us. Its scriptural iconography serves as its matrix for the cultivation of Christian life at every level. It fosters prayerful contemplation and meditation, critical theological reflection, moral responsibility and social commitment. The Church uses its scriptural iconography both to free us from false and distorted images of ourselves and God, such that orientate us to self-destructive behaviour, and also to provide us with truly good images that orientate us to the fullness of life in the Spirit of Christ.

The notion of image, *eikon*, is drawn on in the Bible to express diverse aspects of the relationship between God and humankind. The priestly writer of the creation account affirms that we are made in the image of God (Gn 1:27). Paul says that that image is perfectly shown forth in Jesus, who is the *eikon* of the invisible God (Col 1:15), to whom we are to conform (Rm 8:29); he also says that this is not only an eschatological hope but also in some measure a present reality, because to behold the glory of the Lord is to be changed into his *eikona* from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18). In the Gospel of John, Jesus affirms that to have seen him was to have seen the Father (Jn: 12:45; 14:9). The life story of Jesus was not a copy of the Father but the icon disclosing his God and Father to the world. The life story of the crucified and risen Jesus is the paradigmatic image for Christian faith; inasmuch as we cannot do what we cannot in any way imagine, Jesus as the icon of God motivates faith to a new way of being-in-the-world as being-with-others.

In John 17:24 Jesus prays that his disciples may behold my glory'. All the deeds of Christ are signs manifesting the glory of God to persons of faith; the 'glory' of his death consists in the supreme manifestation of

God's saving love for all humankind. Jesus prays on the night before his death that in his death the Father may glorify him and he may glorify his Father; he prays that the Holy Spirit will glorify him in the disciples. By welcoming the Spirit of Jesus' self-giving into their own lives, the disciples manifest and communicate his glory. The Spirit of the Father and the Son is manifest in the communion of the disciples: 'By this all will know that you are my disciples . . .' (Jn 13:35).

If our image of God determines the persons we become, our image of ourselves reflects what we believe to be the truth about God. Although published fifty years ago, Pieter Viereck's book *Metapolitics: The Roots of the Nazi Mind* (New York: Capricorn Books) still helps us to appreciate the condition from which Christ would redeem us. It is a study of a sick ideal, of a sick image of the divine and human. Spengler, Nietzsche and Wagner contributed to the sources of Nazi ideology an image of man as a beast of prey. For Spengler the great beasts of prey were noble creatures of the most perfect type, without the lies of human morality attributable to weakness, and believers in social ethics were only beasts of prey with their teeth pulled out. Nietzsche affirmed that Christianity aimed at mastering beasts of prey; its *modus operandi* was to make them ill—the Christian recipe for taming or civilizing was to make feeble. Wagner believed that our clergy-ridden civilization reduced the health-exuding warriors of the north into weak-nerved cripples. The Nazi propagandist Alfred Rosenberg reinterpreted Christ as one of a long line of Aryan heroes, ranging from Wotan and Siegfried to Wagner and Hitler. The Nazi state was believed to 'image' the totality of God; hence, Pastor Leffler asked people to choose between Israel and God—to decide which was truly the 'chosen people' to embody the 'God of History'. Hans Kerrl, Minister for Church Affairs, affirmed in 1937 that a new authority had arisen to define what Christ and Christianity really were: Adolph Hitler, the true Holy Spirit. A century before the rise of Hitler, Fichte had already claimed that the German mind was the self-consciousness of God.

Their image of the divine and human as predator defined the Nazis themselves, corroborating the teaching of the prophets that worshippers are assimilated to that which they worship: 'Vanity they pursued, vanity they became,' said Jeremiah (Jr.:2:5). Now, of course, the Hitler regime belongs to history. But how dead is the ideology which brought the Nazis to such extraordinary power? We cannot afford to be complacent: we cannot afford to live with a debased idea of what 'glory' is. The Christian community must proclaim more strongly what its gospels teach to be the true meaning of 'glory'.