
ICONS: A WINDOW OF FAITH

Mother Sarah explores the paradox of icons and their place in prayer

Icons have been used in the worship of Orthodox Christians throughout their history. They are increasingly used by Christians of other traditions. Icons, or images, proclaim that God became a human being and can therefore become visible, and can be depicted in visible human form.

At the same time, people who paint and use icons know that God is transcendent, he will always be ultimately beyond our understanding or imagination. Icon painters try to hold together these paradoxical truths. For that reason, icons are not a naturalistic portrayal of the world as we see it and are painted with in a stylised way, showing that we are looking through a “window” of faith.

The presence of an icon in a space proclaims faith in Christ and his sovereignty. They are a non-verbal way of confessing faith in Christ and asking for his blessing and protection in the physical environment in which we live. They are a reminder that we are always in the presence of the living God. The “great cloud of witnesses” – the members of the Church throughout the ages are also a living reality.

Many Christians use icons as a focus for their prayer. These images can designate an area set aside for prayer and help a person to direct their attention. However, they are not essential for prayer, which can take place anywhere and without books or aids.

Icons also proclaim our vocation as human beings to be transfigured by the grace of God. People who were closely involved with Jesus, (like his mother), and the saints, are portrayed with light coming from *within* them. They remind



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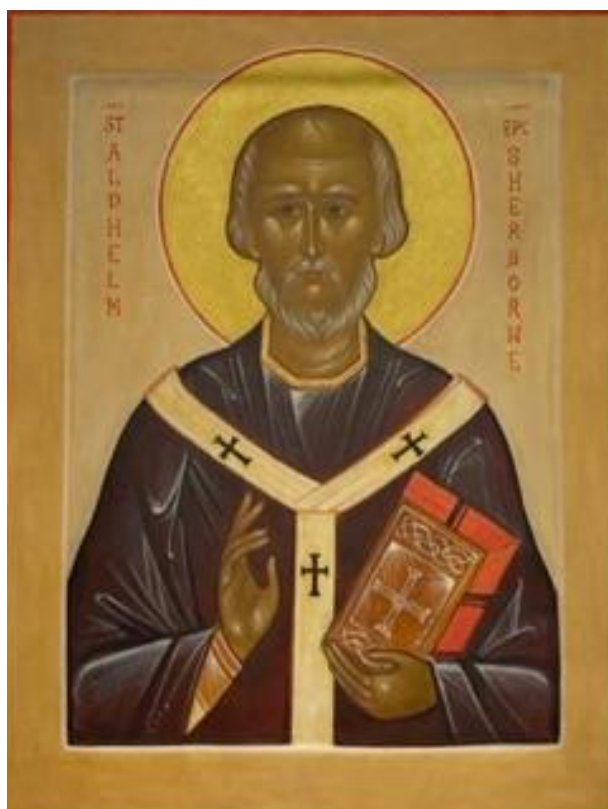
us that we are all called to be changed and transfigured by God's grace. The natural world too is shown with light coming from *within* it. The natural world declares the immanence of God. He is with us in the material stuff of the universe, always there if we turn our hearts towards him. There is always more to an icon than meets the eye... among countless other things they are saying: "the whole earth is full of your glory".

ST ALDHELM

The hand-painted icon of St Aldhelm in the Chaplaincy was created in memory of the first chaplain at Bath, Robin Lankester

Aldhelm was born in Wessex in 639 and joined the monastery in Malmesbury as a young man. He was sent to Canterbury to be educated under the scholar Adrian, Abbot of St Augustine's, and had soon impressed his teachers with his skill in the study of Latin and Greek literature. Aldhelm returned to Malmesbury and his reputation as a scholar spread far and wide, with students and scholars from France, Ireland and Scotland coming to learn from him. Aldhelm is said to have spoken and written fluent Latin and Greek, and was able to read the Old Testament in Hebrew. He was the first person to write poetry in the English language. Besides poetry he composed music and sang – King Alfred the Great placed him in the first rank of poets in the country and his ballads were popular even as late as the 12th Century. Aldhelm excelled at playing many different instruments, including the harp, fiddle and pipes.

In 683, Aldhelm was made Abbot of Malmesbury. Under his leadership, the Abbey continued to be a seat of learning and was given many gifts from kings and nobles. This enabled him to enlarge the monastery at Malmesbury and



built the Church of St Peter and St Paul. He founded monasteries in Frome and Bradford-on-Avon, where he also built St Laurence's Church which still stands today.

A delightful story from his time as a monk at Malmesbury records that he was so upset about the small numbers of people coming to church on Sunday that he resorted to unusual measures. He would go to the town bridge on a Sunday morning, do some juggling and sing ballads of his own composition. When he had attracted people's attention, he would switch to preaching and exhorting people to go to church.

The historian William of Malmesbury observed that if Aldhelm "had proceeded with severity ... he would have made no impression whatever upon them." But by seeking out people where they were and speaking directly to them, Aldhelm had succeeded in "impressing on their minds a truer feeling of religious devotion." In 705, the Bishopric of Wessex was split into two dioceses and Aldhelm was made Bishop of Sherborne. The monks at Malmesbury refused to let their beloved father relinquish his abbacy, so he performed both responsibilities at once, covering huge distances in order to do so.

Although already sixty-five, and an old man by the standards of the day, he was an energetic and hardworking bishop. He established churches all over Dorset and Wiltshire, including at Langton Matravers and the Royal Palace at Corfe. He rebuilt the church at Sherborne and helped to establish a women's monastery at Wareham.

On 25th May 709, just four years after his consecration, Aldhelm died at Doultling in Somerset. His funeral procession travelled 50 miles from Doultling to Malmesbury and stone crosses were planted at 7-mile intervals, to mark each place where his body rested for the night.

St Aldhelm's feast day is 25th May.



Above: *The Saxon Church of St Laurence stands next to Holy Trinity Church in Bradford on Avon*

THE SUPPER AT EMMAUS

Revd Stephen Girling of Bath Abbey analyses the layers of meaning contained in one well known Byzantine-style icon depicting an important event in the Gospel

The Supper at Emmaus icon depicts Jesus sharing a meal with Cleopas and another disciple after they had encountered him when walking to Emmaus. The icon shows the point in the narrative when Jesus breaks the bread and the two disciples recognise at last who it is – their Lord, risen from the dead. It's typical of icons in the Orthodox tradition that people are shown without expression. Icons are not intended to elicit a feeling but to celebrate a reality – that the glory of the risen Lord is now present in the midst of human affairs, even an occasion as normal and down to earth as the sharing of a meal.

The icon shows the other disciple as St Luke, his raised hand and the outstretched finger of Cleopas, are two very subtle indications of their glad reaction to the realisation that it's Jesus.

Orthodox Icons always have the Greek letters in Jesus' halo indicating that he is 'the one who is' a transliteration of the Hebrew name that God used for himself with Moses 'I am who I am'. This has always been a radical statement in Orthodox Iconography, though we may not think it today: this Jesus, risen from the tomb, is the one who has existed eternally as God.

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The space at the table in the front of the Icon, invites us into the narrative – what is our response to the glory of the risen Lord present to us? May we be 'gladdened by the sight of the risen Lord' even in the most unlikely of places & people. And may other people be gladdened to glimpse Christ in us – in our humility and gentleness – for that is the Christian posture encouraged in Orthodox worship which includes icons & a sense of the great 'communion of saints' of which we are a part.