

THE ICONIC IMAGE

Sermon, November 21, 2010

Texts: Luke 23:33-43; Colossians 1:9-20

Those of you who follow such things know today is the final Sunday of the church year; next Sunday begins a new liturgical year as we begin the season of Advent. Today, on the liturgical calendar, we commemorate Christ the King Sunday; we commemorate His lordship over all things. We read earlier: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him, all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17)."

"He is the image of the invisible God." As a synonym for "image" is "picture"; Paul tells us Jesus is the living picture of God, He is making visible what is otherwise invisible. This is a basic point of Christian theology for most, if not all, of you; we believe Jesus is God in flesh and blood so that we who are flesh and blood might know beyond a doubt who God is, what God is about in this world, and what it is God wants of us. Or, as I summarize for our confirmation students each year, Jesus came into this world to show us the *personality* of God, to show us the *Love* of God, and to show us the *Way* of God. He came as God in the flesh to show us what God is like. He is the image of the invisible God.

Another synonym for "image" is the word "icon." An *icon* is defined by the dictionary as (1) a pictorial representation. Icon is also defined as (2) a religious image typically painted on a wooden panel, particularly in the Eastern traditions. Icon is also defined as *3) an emblem or symbol. You may have heard the term "Iconic image." An iconic image is a picture or photo or a painting that is more than just a picture; it is a symbol that inspires and moves you at a deep gut level as it captures the essence and spirit of an era, an event or a season. Often these iconic images have won Pulitzer Prizes for the photographers:



A few iconic images of the twentieth century those of us 39 or older well remember from years past: Joe Rosenthal's February 23, 1945 picture of raising the flag at Iwo Jima on Mount Suribachi (which is arguably the most reproduced photograph of all time); this iconic image did much to raise flagging support to do what it takes to end the war and bring peace. Months later in 1945, Alfred Eisenstadt's picture "The Kiss"; the sailor kissing that white-stockinged woman in Times Square, captured the jubilation and joy and pride of victory in WWII and a world at peace. On the other end of the emotional spectrum, you may remember Nick Ut's 1972 photo of the little Vietnamese girl fleeing in terror from a napalm



strike, her clothing apparently burned off. After taking the picture, the photographer doused the naked Kim Phuc with water and took her to the hospital; the photo served as something of an icon for the peace movement in the 70's. It is said this iconic image did more to end our involvement in Vietnam than all the Paris talks of Mr. Kissinger. Do you remember Steve McCurry's 1984 picture of the Afghan refugee girl and her piercing gaze on the cover of National Geographic, a tragically and hauntingly beautiful iconic image which so captured the plight of the refugees fleeing the monstrous horror of the Soviet invasion? Some of you know this young woman was found again in 2002; National Geographic ran a feature article



on the now-adult Sharbat Gula. And finally, from Beijing June 5, 1989, considered by some to be the most iconic photo ever, Jeff Widener's photo of the tank man facing down the tanks at Tiananmen Square. Again, all iconic images which moved us at a deep level, they captured the essence and spirit and story of an event, an era or a season.



Well, Paul might tell us Jesus is THE iconic image of God. He fully captures the living essence of God; as Paul expresses it, "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Him" Whenever people encountered Jesus they were deeply moved, even as they are today, in good ways and not so good ways. What we find in the Gospels is an uncomfortable reality: There was something about Jesus that made some people want to kill him; hence we find in our Gospel reading Christ the King enthroned on a cross between two thieves.

But for many of you, particularly those under age 39, the first thing that might pop into your mind when you hear the phrase "iconic image" is that of a symbol on the computer screen. That's a definition of Icon that does not appear

in the Collegiate Dictionary I received as a graduation gift when I finished college, for it was a definition that didn't exist yet. So many word definitions have changed with the prevalent invasion of computers in our offices and homes; one of the hardest things for older people about getting computer-savvy is just learning the lingo. Before the computer, memory was something that you lost with age. Before the computer, an application was for employment. Before the computer, a program was something you watched on TV. Before the computer, a cursor was someone with a dirty mouth. Before the computer, a keyboard was a piano and the web was the spider's home. A virus was the flu. Before the computer, a CD was a bank account (and a CD-ROM was a bank account in Italy). A hard drive was a long trip on the road with your children; a hard drive crashing is what happened when you fell asleep at the wheel. A mouse was something the cat brought in. And a mouse pad was where the mouse lived before the cat brought him in. And before the computer, an icon was a religious image. (*As someone expressed it, home computers are the perfect thing for women who don't feel that men provide them with enough frustration.*) Today you can open the *applications* of most *programs* or *access the web* by pointing the *cursor* to the *icon* and clicking the *mouse* ... and my 77 year old father would not understand any of that preceding sentence. Definitions have changed. When you click an icon with the cursor (or, when you point that little white arrow on the screen to that little picture on the screen by using that doohickey on the rubber pad next to the letter keys), the program behind the icon opens up to you, and you find yourself transported into this wondrous world where there are almost limitless wonders of things you can do. You enter the program through the icon. Well, Jesus is the iconic image of God in this sense, as well. He is the One through whom you and I enter into God's program, in Him is the fullness of God's presence, through Him you enter the limitless wonders of God's boundless reality.

This is what the church confesses about Jesus: He is not only the Christ of God, He is the image, the icon, the One through whom you and I can be drawn into the God "program," into the vast wonders of his Kingdom, into the very presence of the invisible God. Just as that thief on Calvary discovered; he "clicked on" the icon of Jesus while he had opportunity and entered the paradise of God. No one comes to the Father but by Jesus. He is the "icon" of God.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." The word "firstborn" here has to do with rank more than with sequential order: The eternally begotten Son of God is sovereign both within and over creation, for He was not only present at creation, but He was the One through whom God created all things in heaven and earth. The One who entered the world in order to redeem it is the One through whom God created the world in the first place. He is the master Artist who, at no small cost to Himself, somehow entered into His damaged masterpiece to restore it to its original glory. "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together."

Fourteen years ago next week my family moved to Rhode Island. At the time, as many of you who have relocated can understand, our lives entered a sort of perpetual chaos (*which, by the way, really never ended*). Relocating can drive anyone a little crazy. I remember just getting dressed in the morning back then would be an adventure, because all my clothes had hidden themselves in very different places; I had one brown shoe and one black shoe that apparently ran off together and I never did find them. It seemed like nothing was where it should have been, and part of that was there really was no "should be" place because it was a different house. It has often struck me that life is like that. Life is a "moving" experience; we always seem to be a perpetual state of relocation that never ends. You can never seem to find quite what you are looking for. Family dynamics are never very neat or in the right place. Relationships just aren't what they are supposed to be. Things in the workplace are often messy, a bit disorganized, out of place. In spite of all your hard work, you always have a haunting feeling that some of your many responsibilities are slipping through the cracks. You get tired of being pulled in twenty different directions and doing only a mediocre job at any of them, because you just don't have the time to excel in one area as you try to get everything in the right place. You would love to drop something, to just put it out on the curbside and have it hauled away, but you know that just isn't realistic. Everything is important. So, your schedule is never quite right, in spite of trying so hard to keep everyone happy. Your body is never quite right, in spite of the new exercise programs or medications or diets you've tried. And everyone here has at least one relationship that is never quite right.

The nasty little secret is that nothing will ever be fully, completely, 100% perfect and "in the right place" this side of heaven! The key is to find a Savior in the midst of this disorganized mess this side of heaven, a Lord who enters into the moving chaos of this world Who can help you hold all things together until the Day He takes you home. "*In him, all things in heaven and on earth were created ... In him, all things hold together.*" ALL THINGS hold together in Christ the King. You cannot miss Paul's point; in five verses, he says, "all things" five times. Paul is quite clear. "All things hold together in Christ." In the words of the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, "There is not one inch of the world that Christ does not claim, saying, 'That is mine. That belongs to me.'" This does not mean the world looks like it belongs to Christ right now. One Day it will, but in the here and now it also means the presence of Christ the King can be found in all things, in all places, even the places where you live and work and study and play.

Jesus doesn't just show us the way; He IS the way. He is the Icon. He is the God who has come to us, and now the "right place" is to be with Him, in relation to Him, reconciled to God through Him, working with Him wherever He may be found ... which is *in all things* ... and thus entering into the 'program' of the Kingdom of God.