

Jesus, Ruler of All - Easter 2

Acts 5:27–32; Psalm 118:14–29; Revelation 1:4–8; John 20:19–31



When I looked at today's readings, the thing that immediately struck me was that we are hearing about a different Jesus to the one we considered during the weeks leading up to Easter. Here we see the awesome nature of God in Christ, and this made me immediately think of a famous icon, that of '*Jesus Pantocrator*'. That is 'Ruler of all'. This is not Jesus in the frailty of his human condition, but Jesus, God; the one through all things were made. I thought that I would explore some of what this icon has to say to us as I did with the Trinity icon last year.

This icon is known from examples that go all the way back to the sixth century and presumably it goes much further back than that. It varies somewhat depending on the artist and its purpose. The little icon on the side table at St Barnabas is an example of a slightly different version. Interestingly, the Pantocrator icon is the origin of our commonest image of Jesus, the lean face, beard, hair divided in the middle, clothed in a brown tunic and blue cloak.

If we look a little more closely we see there are two phrases in Greek within the icon, IC XC is simply an abbreviation for Jesus Christ. The second phrase says in Greek 'ho on'. 'He who is.' Or 'the existing one'. This is a translation into Greek of the Hebrew phrase from Exodus where God names himself to Moses as 'I am who I am'. And here is the first serious thing for us to reflect on in the icon. What we see is Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth; a human figure in modest, not royal or

priestly clothing, a recognizably human face and figure. Yet of this face and figure we can say, 'This is truth, this is reality': what is alive within Jesus is life itself, the very act of being, which is God. As John says 'He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being through him was life.' Although Jesus, like any human being, is vulnerable to what happens in history (and the services of the past couple of weeks remind us of this only too directly), this human being is in every moment, even in the deepest vulnerability of Gethsemane and the cross, the reality of God. There is tremendous tension here isn't there? Divine action appears to us in all the human detail of this life, not as an extra to it, not as a mysterious something or other floating above the surface of history, but embodied in it. To confront Jesus is to confront eternal truth. If, like Pilate, we ask, 'What is truth' the answer is before us in the icon 'He who is'. This icon is saying in a different way what Jesus said of himself 'Before Abraham was, I am'.

So, quite simply, in the icon it is a reflection of the ultimate reality that we face; nothing is more fundamental than Jesus, nothing will bring us closer to the heart of being itself than Jesus. Whether we are looking at God, at the universe or at our own lives, the deepest level we can attain is found here face to face with the reality of Jesus. All that we cannot understand intellectually is laid open to us in him. To be in relationship with Jesus is to be 'in the truth of existence' even when we cannot find the words for it. And this also tells us that there is something in the being of God that is *appropriately* expressed in a vulnerable life, in the action that brings ultimate truth to us in the realities of human relationships, in joy, in suffering and in mortality,

So to be truly ourselves we also need to enter into this reality – not to seek for divine dignity and knowledge that lifts us out of this messy world, but to be aligned with God’s sacrificial love as we live our lives with all the risk that involves. There is no static and detached divine nature somewhere beyond the active love of God. God is the love that welcomes us, and there is, in one important sense, nothing more we need to know of God. An *appropriate* life for us, as for God, is a vulnerable life.

There are a couple of other aspects of the icon we need to consider. The right hand held with the fingers extended, signified in ancient times someone engaged in teaching. So what is encoded in this image is the insight that truth, the ground of reality itself, is self-communicating: reality ‘longs’ to be known, to share and instruct, to reach out and make claim on our gaze. We need to see existence itself caught up in God’s own will, in God’s own longing to share divine truth. Everything in creation is a divine outreaching to us. To truly ‘know’ something is to become alert to God’s outreach within it. In the face of Christ, we begin to learn how to look and listen for that outreach in the whole world. The icon helps us see everything anew.

The other aspect is the open book towards which Christ is gesturing. Sometimes there is a relevant verse for the circumstances for which the particular icon was made. Typical texts are: ‘I am the light of the world’, ‘I am the way the truth and the light’, ‘do not judge according to appearances, but be just in your judgement’, ‘come to me all who are heavy laden’. Sometimes, as in our icon at St Barnabas, the book is closed. Whatever the text, it is clear that the living Christ points to the living word of the bible for his truth to come home to us in a specific

moment. And the words may be inviting, challenging or reassuring, but the point is always to establish for us the relation in which we stand to Christ: facing him and learning what is true of us and of God. The image in all cases is one in which we are directed towards scripture to reinforce the underlying statement made by the icon, the bible is there to recall us to that revelation of the very character of the divine life, centred on Jesus. We meet God as Word, as communication, in creation, in Jesus, and in the biblical record, because the action of God is always communicative, designed to transform our knowing and feeling selves. And when we approach the bible we must approach it, as in the icon, as if it were held open to us by the living Christ. Christians, especially in the west are prone to two kinds of misunderstanding of scripture – either reading the bible as a mere record of what some humans thought in the past, or reading it as an oracle divorced from the living personal presence of Christ, so that we do not read it in the light of Christ. Reflecting on this icon can help us put our reading of the bible into the perspective of our relationship with Christ. We can then read asking him to show us in our reading the truth of ourselves and God once more.

The point is simple: face to face with Jesus, there and only there, do we find who we are. We have been created to mirror his life, the eternal life of the one turned always towards the overflowing love of the Father. In this icon we look at him looking at us, and try to understand that as he looks at us he looks at the Father. In other words, when he sees us, he sees the love that is his own source and life, despite all we have done to obscure it in ourselves. When we look at him we see both what we were made to be, bearers of the divine image and likeness, and what we have made of ourselves.