

TRUSTING THE UNSEEN Iain McKillop

Companions' Festival Day – Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield

NB: TITLES IN BOLD CAPITALS denote the slide illustrating each paragraph

Opening Prayer: *God of Truth, open our senses to be aware of you; open our minds that you may communicate to us; open our hearts that we may respond to your guidance through Jesus' truth. AMEN*

TALK 1 - GOD'S IMAGERY: The Invisible Reveals Himself Through Metaphors

Many thanks for inviting me to share today with you. Mirfield has been a very special community for me over the last 10 years and it is a privilege to be involved with you.

Iain McKillop JOHN OF THE CROSS TRIPTYCH

I've been artist in residence with the community twice, first for just 2 weeks of Lent before I was ordained, when I painted a triptych based on the contemplative poetry of John of the Cross.

Iain McKillop PSALMS

Second, for a longer stay three years ago, when the monastic rhythm of the psalter inspired a long series of studies of the imagery in the Psalms. I initially began my career as an art-historian with special interest in Christian symbolism and the history of Christian art and it's been a privilege to lead a number of art & theology days at the Mirfield Study Centre on Rembrandt, Mary, Fra Angelico, Emmaus & Walking with Christ.

McKillop GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL LADY CHAPEL ALTARPIECE

These days I balance my time between working as a non-stipendiary curate in Surrey, painting for exhibitions in churches, church commissions like this altar-piece for Gloucester Cathedral and leading retreats based on theology and the arts.

By faith Christians believe that though God is invisible and mysterious he has revealed aspects of himself and truth through time, through his actions, through scripture and through relationship with us. For centuries the arts have been used to contemplate, to sensitise us, to teach faith & encourage worship.

Iain McKillop PSALM: I WILL MEDITATE UPON YOUR MYSTERY

Christians tend to use language rather loosely when we talk of God speaking to us through scripture, art or his world. Literalists sometimes imply that God dictated

scripture to Moses, the Gospel Writers, Paul, John the Divine and others and that believers hear him speaking directly. But we know that the majority of us learn faith and knowledge of God more intuitively and indirectly. Christ prayed that we might "know God" (Jn17:3), Paul wanted us to 'know what we believe'. Yet if we're honest and precise in our language, few, if none of us, truly 'know, see or hear' God directly. We most often develop understandings of God as we 'practise his presence', explore and study scripture, feel moved or communicated to by God's Spirit, or feel intuitively that something about or from him is 'true'.

McKillop PSALM: I DRINK FROM YOUR COOL REFRESHING POOLS

Mature faith learns to 'Trust' what we believe is true yet cannot prove. Witness Evangelism, Apologetics and Spiritual Direction aim to help people trust in a God we only understand partially but whose truth nourishes us. Jesus aimed to reveal God more fully than previously, help people follow God more truly and, as he told the Samaritan woman at the well, bring a state when we worship in spirit and in truth and are eternally refreshed by God's 'living water'.

Iain McKillop PSALM IMAGE: I SEEK BUT CANNOT FIND

St Paul trusted "now we only know partially... one day we shall see face to face" (1Cor.13:12). True faith trusts while much remains mystery.

Today I'd want to explore just a few of the images people have found meaningful in comprehending God. In the first talk I'll explore some Biblical imagery and how it strengthens our trust in the invisible God. In the second talk I'll look at some artist's images that suggest aspects of God and help me trust & believe.

'SCRIPTURE, REASON, TRADITION'

God seems to reveal aspects of himself in various ways. Since Richard Hooker we've been taught that we know God through Scripture, Reason and Tradition. I'd expand those to include:

- God's Spirit interacting with and living in us,
 - our life-experiences,
 - multiple traditions and teachings of faith,
 - details of the world God created and sustains,
 - our thinking minds interpreting life and belief,
- and also two faculties often neglected by apologists –
- our intuition
 - and our imagination
- the creative parts of our minds, which can reach far beyond what we see, When guided by God's Spirit our imaginations created many of the metaphors by which we understand our unseen God, our intuitions distinguish truth from fantasy.

MARK WALLINGER CHRIST -TRAFALGAR SQUARE/ REMBRANDT ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS National Gallery, London.

Most tangibly and fully Christians believe that God unveiled himself through Jesus' life, character, teaching & actions. Colossians 1:15 calls him: "*the image of the invisible God*" - God revealing himself through a human life as relevant today as in the 1st Century. Rembrandt suggests that symbolically here by radiating light from the baby, the empty basket suggests that he has come from heaven to bring light to the world, even homely shepherds like us! The cross-beams of the stable suggest the Cross by which Jesus will redeem us. The Picture is full of metaphors for Christian beliefs.

McKillop JOHN OF THE CROSS EXPLORES THE MEANING OF TRINITY

Wouldn't it be assuring if we all saw God tangibly enough to be certain of his existence and presence with us? It might terrify us, as encounters in the stories of Moses, Job and John's vision on Patmos suggest. Yet a provable experience would give us certainty when we question faith, might enthuse & strengthen our witness and possibly frighten us into less sin & more sincere discipleship.

NOLI ME TANGERE / INCREDULITY OF THOMAS

Mary and Thomas saw, touched and believed. The writer of the Epistles of John was convinced when he wrote: "*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at & touched with our hands!*" (1John1:1) Our faith teaches that God continues to reveal and wants us to know him, if only be partially. Each of us will have had important particular experiences that convince us – answers to prayer, changes in our lives or others', events, influential encounters or points of enlightenment that have guided us. We hold onto these, particularly at challenging times.

“FAITH IS THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR THE KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS AS YET UNSEEN.” Heb.11:1

The more I study apologetics to try to prove faith to others, the more I wonder if God's hiddenness is actually a positive asset; it requires us to use our imaginations to expand our ideas of God and develop trust in the unseen. Faith would be VERY different if we saw God as Moses experienced him on Sinai.

MOSES ON THE MOUNTAIN / “OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE”

If we saw God and experienced his power directly, we'd need to be obedient as servants of a God we'd be frightened to disobey. It's dangerous to try to imagine God's intentions, we can't, but perhaps it's God's intension that we choose to believe. We find him & develop a relationship of love with him by choice not by

having his existence and demands forced upon us as once they were. Trust and love develop as we trust God's presence with us: That's "Faith!"

We may be stronger human beings for not having indisputable proofs. Not seeing or being able to prove God forces us to depend on ourselves as well as on God. Our minds expand as we reason through why we believe or use our imaginations to understanding God and work out how to follow his way. Our understanding of God must continue to grow as life and our brains expand and develop. Though the Bible remains foundational to our faith, a sure guideline, and a plumb-line by which we judge what is true, if our understanding of God's truth today is only limited to what the Bible says literally, our minds would not have developed as God intends us to have grown over two millennia. We are surely meant to expand our theological understanding as our understanding of science, cosmology, philosophy, sociology, comparative religions and other knowledge of the world expands.

MERTON QUOTE Thomas Merton wrote: "*We should live as if we are seeing God face to face, but we should not conceive an image of God. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension, and realising him in all.*" (Hidden Ground of Love p.63-64) "Realising God in all" includes finding him through all our involvement in life.

I'm sure we've all made mistakes in imagining God. The Church, like most religions has made mistakes since our foundation. In my Evangelical 20s I know I was insensitive to others' religious ideas and doubts and I certainly had dodgy superstitious interpretations of God – I'm sure I still mistake God. It took me over 40 years to trust that God could love me or care for me. Mistakes in understanding God prevent us developing a true relationship, make us represent him wrongly in our witness and can disfigure his Church. God's Kingdom can only be built as we find and live by the truth.

BLAKE'S JOB – JOB AND HIS FRIENDS

The ancient sacred drama of Job shows how human reason makes mistakes and is incapable of fully comprehending spiritual truths. Neither Job nor his four companions with their confused, elaborately-reasoned arguments were able to truly explain God and the spiritual issues behind suffering.

GOD SPEAKS TO JOB OUT OF THE WHIRLWIND

Only God's speeches towards the end of Job reveal that there is a far more expansive plan behind the world than we comprehend. To all the reasoning that has gone on for 36 chapters God says: *Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*" [38:2]. This could be a comment on theological & artistic

speculation for centuries: ‘darkening counsel by words without knowledge’ ... a terrible danger for any of us who speak with partial knowledge of anything!

Job’s humble response sets human reasoning in true perspective: *“I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know... I heard of you by the hearing of the ear but now I see you I regret my weak comprehension and repent.”* [42:3-6]. It’s in a relationship of trust that we find God.

McKillop PSALM: I AM FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE

Human beings seem to have developed or been created with inner longings to comprehend and reach out for things that are way beyond our immediate capabilities. The Qoheleth, the wise compiler of ideas in Ecclesiastes considered our longing for knowledge like this “God has set eternity in the human heart, yet we cannot fathom God from beginning to end” (Eccl.3:11). I’m sure that reaching out for the ultimately unattainable has been a motivating force behind human advance over millennia. We often want to understand the incomprehensible ‘that little bit more’. which has led to advances in all fields of human endeavour - theology, science, technology, sociology, philosophy, the arts, politics. Perhaps aspiring beyond our limitations is a legacy of being ‘in the image of God’.

As part of this reaching out to understand nearly all cultures have tried to create names, images or metaphors to explain God or the forces behind the cosmos. We can’t truthfully, fully represent God, but we can use known human or natural experiences as metaphors to reach towards and understanding of him.

ISLAM 99 NAMES FOR GOD

Islam has 99 Names suggesting Allah’s different characteristics, for example: Ar Rahman/The All-Merciful, Al Malik/The Sovereign, Al Salam/Peace and Blessing, Al Mu’min/The Guarantor, Al Ghaffar/The Ever-Forgiving.

HEBREW TITLES FOR GOD

Hebrew added phrases to God’s title, like YHWH Jireh/God the Provider (Gen.22:13-14), YHWH Rapha/God the Healer (Ex.15:26, Isa.53:4-5) YHWH Shalom/God our Peace (Judg.6:24), El ha-Gibbor/God the Strong Hero, El Shaddai/God the Overpowerer/ Destroyer, YHWH Elyon/God the Supreme/Most High to similarly represent his nature.

Scripture also uses metaphors and metaphorical or symbolic phrases like: Breath/Ruach, The Name/ Judge, Teacher, King, Upholder, Protector. The Psalms are especially replete with poetic metaphors: Rock (Ps.18:2) , Fortress, Foundation, Refuge & Resting Place, *“the sheltering shadow or your wings”* or

“you raise me up on wings as an eagle”. Scriptures talk of God’s hands, feet, mouth, ears, strong arm; he ‘walks beside’ us. God is described as a Lion, a Consuming Fire, a Horn of Salvation (Ps.18:2), a Banner (1Chron:29:11-13), a Shield (Deut.33:29). All these suggest characteristics to hold onto in our imagination, not to regard as physical descriptions. Christians continue to use these and other wonderful poetic imagery to represent our emotional understanding of God’s ‘otherness’. If we take any metaphors too literally they could belittle or disfigure our understanding of God, as in Durer’s images of the Book of Revelation:

DÜRER REVELATION WOODCUT

Dürer illustrated the metaphorical descriptions of Christ in an over-literal and rather surreal way – his legs are fiery, metal pillars, his tongue literally is a two-edged sword! Dürer was caught between past Catholic poetic reading of metaphors and the newly emerging Protestant desire to insist that we take the Bible both seriously and literally. I’m sure Dürer didn’t think that John saw Christ as such an unhuman image in his visions: the artist was rendering visually a literal reading of the metaphors used by John to describe Christ’s transcendence, glory and power: But in being so literal rather than emphasising that the imagery is metaphorical, Dürer unintentionally almost makes the power of God in Christ seem as monstrous as the beasts of the Apocalypse. This is imagery of a God to be feared and obeyed!

Metaphors throughout the Apocalypse are actually intended to show that Jesus Christ is more reliable, powerful and victorious than any other power that could be against God’s people. The rich imagery, often related to metaphors in Hebrew Apocalyptic writings like Daniel, was chosen to elevate Christ in the minds of Christians under threat, and help assure them that God is trustworthy. It’s sad that the Apocalypse embarrasses some Christians today, resulting in its neglect through being regarded as ‘difficult’. We’re not meant to understand all its symbolism and references; we’re meant to trust its image of Jesus as the power who can restore our world. The Christian Church today is under threat in many parts of the world. The murder of Father Hamel in France would have been unthinkable several years ago. But so many powers at work today challenge Christian living. Perhaps the assurance contained in the metaphors that represent our Faith might help us hold onto God more securely.

EGYPT

Imagery has often been used to represent invisible divine powers in many cultures. Some religions borrow from characteristics of powerful natural creatures to represent the various characteristics of the gods, as in the multiple

gods of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia or multiple avatars of one deity represented in Hinduism. A bull (or elephant in Hinduism) suggested God's power, the violence of a lion reflected fear of God, his supremacy in nature, the sun suggested overall rule, the eagle – god's far-sight, the control over death was represented by the vulture or jackal, creatures of graveyards.

MESOPTAMIAN GODS & GUARDIAN FIGURES

Abraham's origins were in Ur in Mesopotamia, where in two later cultures - Assyria and Babylon, huge images of eagles, bulls or lions represented and guarded the power of gods. Abraham's descendants developed the more personal, understanding of one invisible God that we see evolving through the Bible.

But they possibly passed down memories of the superhuman representations of gods from their experiences in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Though divine commandments through Moses ruled that God shouldn't be represented, some imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures may retain possible references to past religious representations.

VISION OF EZEKIEL

The figures we now associate as Gospel symbols – the lion of St. Mark, the Winged man of St. Matthew, the Winged Ox representing St. Luke and the Eagle of St. John refer back to the Ezekiel's vision (Ezek.1:4-28) of God riding on a chariot powered by similar strong supernatural figures.

In exile in Babylon, Ezekiel's people would have encountered images of spiritual beings with creatures' heads (unless they remained totally culturally separate, which was probably not possible).

ASSYRIAN THRONE OF THE GODS & VISION OF EZEKIEL

Assyrian and Babylonian Gods were represented as enthroned or riding on similar winged creatures and chariots. Ezekiel's description of God's chariot-throne drawn by such creatures may have been his way of suggesting that the Hebrew monotheistic God is greater than all rival surrounding cultures or powers. Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian and Canaanite gods (1 Ki.7:3) were subservient to Israel's God. God rides above them, controls them and directs the world. His power is over all.

WILLIAM BLAKE – VISION OF EZEKIEL

While understanding such biblical images in historical context, it's more useful to consider their potential meaning for us today. We can reflect on biblical imagery in the same way as we reflect on scripture in Lectio Divina, asking "What did it mean then?" & "What might it mean to me now?"

If God were to be visualised riding above a chariot of powerful contemporary creatures, what powers might he be depicted as dominant over - both powers of good that hold sway in our world and powers that corrupt? Perhaps winged and with the many heads of international bankers, business-leaders, technology companies, industrialists, capitalists, fundamentalists of all persuasions, arms dealers, political or religious corruption, the dominance of women over men or men over women, exploiters of sexuality, all sorts of ethical disruption?

Do we trust that God's power is stronger than all the powers around us? - materialism, a society driven by economy and business power, those who don't always choose what is ethically right or best for the majority but who decide on what is best for themselves, expedient, or able to be covered up! Self-centred indulgence in money or possessions, commercialism, sex, fame, gender-politics – So many gifts that are potentially good and could advance human society can be so easily corrupted or used for wrong ends.

We so often bewail the state of our world and the powers like ISIS that are corrupting it. Might Ezekiel's imagery help us pray positively and hold onto the hope that despite the world's mess, God can work through us, even through manoeuvring corrupt powers to move our world towards his Kingdom?

BLAKE - VISION OF EZEKIEL & THE ANCIENT OF DAYS

I often pray by imagining myself in the presence of Complete Truth, opening myself to God in that way. Imagining God as a huge creative, personal Force at work in the cosmos or the presence of Truth are possibly as mistaken as these painted visions by **lake**, but perhaps more useful today than the idea of God as an old bearded man on a throne. Philip Pullman ridiculed it in his Dark Materials Trilogy – God as a weak old man on a chariot, pretending to be powerful. The image of God with a beard and human form developed from the title "One of Ancient Days in Daniel 7. It was used by artists from Holbein to Michelangelo who represent him with the heroic physique of the Greek gods and the white beard of Time. Many still visualise God as a bearded sage or perfect physical being, but this can limit our understanding of God's enormous power & omnipresence. As J.B. Phillips and Thomas Merton pronounced, any idea of God, even as a Force or Truth, is too small.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM QUOTE

John Chrysostom tried to clarify this: *"Let us evoke him as the inexpressible God, incomprehensible and unknowable. Let us affirm that he surpasses all power of human speech, that he eludes the grasp of every mortal intelligence, that angels cannot penetrate him, that cherubim cannot fully understand him. For he is*

invisible to the principalities and powers, the virtues and all creatures. Only the Son and the Holy Spirit can know him” Yet, as Merton added, we try to “*realise him in all.*”

WILLIAM BLAKE – THE ANCIENT OF DAYS

If we consider Daniel’s description of the Lord as “one of Ancient Days” (Dan.7:9) as imagery, not literal description, it becomes meaningful. In Daniel’s culture an ancient sage had greater implications than we often recognise today; his metaphor characterises God as the wisest elder who led, overviewed and ruled the tribe. It is not a description of God’s appearance or physical activity. It is imagery to help Israel understand that the God they trust in is totally wise, he understands their culture and all cultures, he’s witnessed all history so has, depth of understanding and experience. God is one of us so is totally committed to us and to leading us rightly. God’s is being described as the wisest mind from whom to seek guidance. He understands his people’s predicament, he’s seen the worst and the best in the past, he’s guided & will continue to guide with total wisdom, he understands their culture, can judge and assess with total knowledge & can gently forgive, because he understands us thoroughly & wants the best for us. It’s reassuring imagery of God overseeing humanity. Our trust is not in an old, weak, wise figure somewhere away in the dimension of heaven – God is a power, here for us, ever present with us and ever-relevant to every culture because ‘ultimate truth’ is in him - very assuring in an unstable culture like ours.

JACOB’S LADDER – French 18thC / 20thC Icon

Another weak idea today that becomes strong when we see it in context is Jacob’s famous dream of a ladder between earth and heaven with angels climbing up & down. Western ideas of it as a wooden ladder feel rather weak and silly.

BLAKE - JACOB’S LADDER

Blake imagined it as a spiral staircase, which suited his spirituality: like Yeats’ poetic image of the “winding gyre” our spirituality spirals heavenwards and God spirals in response towards us.

ICON OF DIVINE ASCENT/ SUCHEVISTA MONASTERY MURAL

The image feels stronger in icons where gold emphasises the scene’s ‘otherness’. This is visual theology showing God’s constant communication with his creation, defeating evil, conveying blessings and transforming us. This icon is a representation of that belief, to contemplate & know that God is with you in prayer & everyday life. But how would steps between earth and heaven have been culturally imagined when Genesis was written? They had ladders of course

but Genesis was probably edited into its present form after the Exile in Babylon. Jacob’s grandfather Abraham originated in Ur.

ZIGGURATS IN BABYLON & UR

In both Babylon and Ur a ladder linking heaven and earth was the ziggurat, a stepped pyramid surmounted by a temple, the home of the gods, living in the midst of their city. Several contemporary scholars like Bruggemann believe that the ladder described in Jacob’s dream was a ziggurat. If so the story of Jacob makes greater sense. Past cultures believed that gods were confined to particular places, in solid statues, temples like this or oracles. You needed to go to a specific location to worship and ask their guidance. Jacob dreamed that God’s was present with him while journeying. He may have been a small, weak man, lying on a stone pillow in the desert yet God’s enormous temple presence was with him at the top of the steps. This dream confirmed to Jacob and his ancestors that God in power is present with us wherever we go - even when running away, in exile, or in disgrace. God isn’t limited to a certain city or place with a temple. The temple of God, the ladder, the meeting place between God and people travels with us wherever we go.

SANCTUARY TENT, JERUSALEM TEMPLE & MERCY SEAT

When after the exile in Egypt the Hebrew people travelled through the wilderness towards the Promised Land, the Tent of Meeting with the Tabernacle at its centre was their physical symbol of the invisible God’s mobile presence of with his people. The Tabernacle in Solomon’s Temple became a permanent reminder of God’s centrality in their culture. At the heart of both was the Mercy Seat: the Ark of the Covenant, here portrayed in Indiana Jones’ Raiders of the Lost Ark. This was God’s throne at the heart of the community. His seat, above the winged cherubim, again possibly derived from those winged thrones in Egyptian, Sumerian and Assyrian art. The artisans Bezalel and Oholiab (Ex.31:1-11; 35:30-39:31) who built the furnishings of the sanctuary may have known or imagined Egyptian thrones of the gods like those represented here. (Their training as skilled craftsmen may have come through the artisans of Egypt., mightn’t they have drawn from or reinterpreted this for their work, rather than totally inventing new iconography?) The symbolic imagery of the Ark seems to suggest that Yahweh is supreme over all other supernatural spirits and powers, invisibly enthroned over the bending wings and bodies of the cherubim.

SWAN SHELTERING CYGNETS / ARK OF THE COVENANT

When the psalmist sang “we find shelter under the shadow of your wings” (Ps.61:4) he might be referring to chicks sheltering under an adult bird’s wings, as in Jesus’ image of the hen and her chicks (Lk.13:34). But more likely the psalm could be

referring to this ark: the People of Israel could be assured of security, knowing that right at the centre of their culture the invisible God is always here, protecting them securely, invisibly enthroned above the wings of the ark of the covenant in the Temple.

JACOB'S LADDER/TEMPLE/SANCTUARY/ARK

Can this remind us, as we travel through life that everywhere, whatever experience we are going through, God's power is intimately and strongly with us. He's not a weak reminder of faith in an icon on the wall or a cross we wear, he is powerfully, invisibly, physically present enthroned in life: Jacob was vulnerable, running away after dodgy dealings with his brother. His life was under threat, he'd sinned as we do so often. Yet the temple presence of God was still with him and God wanted to communicate with him, guide him and transform him.

Think of St. Paul's wonderful imagery of our bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit. God's power can enthrone himself in our minds our hearts and our actions. - This is enervating but also scary imagery, because it reminds us of our heavy covenant responsibilities to be holy. Paul wrote (1Cor.3:16; 6:15-20) about the need to keep our temple of God pure. Israel feared the holiness of the ark of the covenant. When someone unclean touched the ark as it journeyed to Jerusalem (2Sam.6:6), even though they were trying to save it from toppling they were destroyed; the High Priest approached it with awe. We often take our responsibilities as Christians over-lightly. God treats us with grace and forgiveness but he still expects us to work at holiness and sincere discipleship. As a priest I'm regularly frustrated by how many churchgoers (even myself at times!) seem to have a take-it or leave it faith – *"I'll attend if I feel like it, or if something better doesn't come up."* *"I'll behave like a Christian when it's useful; at other times I'll follow my own self-centred agenda."* You can't nurture true Christian discipleship by such laxness. True Christ-like spirituality requires self-discipline and holiness. Over and over again we fail but can be forgiven and restored.

ARK OF THE COVENANT

The metaphor of the ark could be extended to us: we are each now little arks of the covenant. The tablets of God's law are inside us – God's teaching is in our minds and in our scriptures to be discovered. Also inside us is the showbread – we share the sacred Eucharist together, partly a symbol of the manna that God gives to nourish his people. We are to live as if the presence of God's Spirit is not just with us but in us – we *live* him! – a huge responsibility. We live at the heart of our community to be living examples of God's presence. The tent of meeting at the centre of the community was a constant reminder that God was with his people and had expectations of them. Do you & I live up to our roles as reminders of God's

presence & expectations in our communities – both the secular world where we live and work and our churches? We should be tents of meeting: through us others should know and meet God.

FATHER - MICHELANGELO CREATION OF ADAM

I'll finish this session by discussing the metaphor that remains most replete with meaning: 'God as our Father'. Few more personal metaphors are used of God to help us in our relationship of trust and love. God isn't literally our parent; he didn't 'beget' us in the normal sense of the word. Presumably God's not male, though the Church still has much difficulty replacing that assumption! Yet the metaphor 'Father' suggests many useful connotations.

WILLIAM BLAKE - ELOHIM CREATING & BINDING ADAM

All metaphors have negative potential: Blake believed that 'Elohim' had been interpreted wrongly by the Church for centuries as a tyrannical ruler who bound and restricted the freedom of his followers, as in this watercolour. God should be represented more lovingly, he believed. We mustn't confuse obedience to God as our leader and Father with blindly obeying an over-controlling, legalistic father out of fear. God isn't Rob Titchner in the Archers, nor the oppressive, vindictive idea of Allah who demands the overbearing behaviour of ISIS or Al-Quaida!

IAIN MCKILLOP – RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

All scripture implies that God leads out of care & love wanting the best for all creation. Fatherhood implies that God's relationship with all he has made is personally caring, not impersonal or uninvolved; we're part of him, formed and transformed by him in the process of developing his Kingdom and his eternal family. Our Father has in some ways set his image in us; we have inherited some of God's characteristics & we are responsible for representing him truly to the cosmos. Somewhere inside you & I is a God-likeness to nurture, follow, promote & grow in our communities. God has much invested in us; he depends on us to witness to truths about him. We have inherited his precious world, less as stewards than as 'heirs' to care for it as most cherished parts of that creation. We are meant to feel fellowship with all God's creatures as our family and support one another. Christ calls us family "brothers" and friends "You are my friends if you do what I command you." (Jn15:14-15)

HEBREW IMAGERY OF THE FATHER / BLAKE ELOHIM

Critics, even Christians, sometimes make sweeping generalisations that Old Testament understanding of God is impersonal, violent and vengeful whereas New Testament understanding changes to one of love and compassion. That falsely exaggerates the differences Jesus brought.

BLAKE - JOB AND HIS FAMILY

Ideas of God's parental love & compassion recur regularly in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the Psalms and later prophets, even in the Pentateuch & History books. There are plenty of passages in Hebrew Scriptures where God's parenthood is invoked.

Jesus' use of the word 'Father' didn't so much revolutionise understanding that God is intimately connected with us. Rather he made the relationship even more intimate and responsible. Christ introduced the Aramaic "Abba" calling God 'Daddy'. But though familiar, 'Abba' is still respectful. It's a term that recognises that our relationship with God stems from intimate love as well as respect and obedience.

MICHELANGELO - CREATION OF ADAM

Fatherhood in scripture sometimes suggests God's creation of us:

- Isa 64:8 *"You O Lord are our Father; we are the clay and you are the potter: we are all the work of your hand."*
- Malachi 2:10 *"Have we not all one Father; has not one God created us?"*

BLAKE - JOB AND HIS FAMILY

Sometimes it suggests God's fatherly control and expectations as head of our household:

- Ps.89:26 *"You are my Father, my God and the rock of my Salvation."*
- Isa.9:6 *"The Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace,"*
- Sometimes Father relates to his protection of us:
- Psalm 68:5 God is Father of the fatherless, defender of widows."
- Ps. 103:13 *"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who are in awe of him."*

VAN GOGH/MILLET - FIRST STEPS

Sometimes the image in scripture is of far more intimate Fatherhood, as in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son. Millet and Van Gogh, who copied his picture because of its spiritual significance, used the loving-guidance image of human fatherhood to suggest parallels between natural and spiritual life. It reflects one of my favourite passages in the Hebrew Scriptures where God speaks of guiding his people: Hos.11:1-4 *"When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks; I bent down to them and fed them."* This beautiful, loving imagery is said in the context of a nation who had wandered from God's path.

The parenthood of God is a rich metaphor. Some Christians have tried to play it down over the last 30 years. Partly they've been embarrassed by the patriarchal emphasis on fatherhood.

MILLET - MOTHERHOOD : THE KNITTING LESSON

But we know there are rich metaphors of the motherhood of God too:

- Ps 22:9 *"You are the one who brought me forth from the womb."*
- Ps.131:2 *"As a child weaned at its mother's breast my soul is weaned."*
- Isa 66:13 *"As a mother comforts her child so I will comfort you my people."*
- Christ used the image of himself as a mother hen gathering its brood under its wings for protection in Matt.23:37.

It still sometimes feels a little forced when we use the metaphor 'Mother' for God, even though we've been trying to introduce it into the Church for several decades. It may be interpreted by some as over-politically-correct or paralleling pagan fertility religion. Others point out that the Father/Child relationship has been painful for some, so using the term "Father" of God may evoke bad memories. But the mother/child relationship is equally painful for some others.

VAN GOGH – FIRST STEPS

I don't think we should dismiss the metaphor of God as 'Father', because it implies that he is the example of 'perfect Fatherhood'. The term "our Parent God" seems over-formal; 'Father', like 'Mother' evokes the understanding that our relationship with God is personal, conveying God's intimate relationship and interest in us, and our intimacy with God. But also it suggests our responsibility to him, which includes: obedience, subservience, faithful representation of God and stewardship.

OSSAWA TANNER - THE FRUGAL MEAL

God as our Father is not the imagery of an impersonal controlling God who demands obedience and worship and wants full control of our lives. It's the image of a parent nurturing out of love, of God's mind wanting the best for us the child; longing for us to grow mature, not to fall or be hurt, to take the best paths that help us grow to fullest maturity and not to be deflected to ways that lead to spiritual or physical death.

IAIN MCKILLOP – THE PRODIGAL SON

It's imagery of the God's pastoral heart, a parent who loves intimately and understands the problems of human growth, particularly since Christ lived like us and understands our human nature from the inside, including being tempted in every way as we are as Paul & the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasise. There's no

suggestion that God's understanding of us is limited by being different from us. Scripture assures us that that God knows us thoroughly

PSALM 139

Think particularly of Psalm 139: *"For you created my inmost parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb, my frame was not hidden from you when I was being intricately woven in secret..."*

This is even stronger than imagery of a mother's intimate relationship with a child, having felt it develop inside her womb then watched it as it grew. Psalm 139 suggests an even greater intimacy in our relationship with God: He was there in the womb with us, watching and guiding our formation. The Holy Spirit continues this depth of relationship, living inside our life, understanding our thoughts, not interpreting them by watching from the outside. *"You knew my thoughts"*, imagines the Psalmist, *"even before I began to think them."* These words and the whole Psalm are a rich metaphor for our closeness to God.

McKillop PSALM: SEARCH ME AND KNOW MY INMOST THOUGHTS

So when the Psalmist concludes *"Search me and know my inmost thoughts; see if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the path everlasting"* he's acknowledging how close he wants his discipleship to be. It's not just a covenant promise to follow the tribal God, it's a desire to be totally as one with our source of life: as Jesus prayed in Gethsemane *"May they be one Father as you and I are one!"* (John17:21) That's one of our aims isn't it to be as one with God as he wants us to be and to be one with each other in following him.

In my second talk I'll be reflecting on images that help me feel close to God.

TALK 2 SACRED IMAGES – Opening our Eyes, Minds, Souls and Hearts

In this second talk I want to explore a handful of images from the history of Christian art that speak to me and I hope that our interpretation of them might help you re-explore some images that resonate with you.

Good religious metaphors work on our minds like good poetry or good art. We may not necessarily always get the most out of them at first but something catches our attention and gradually over time comprehension emerges. When I first read T.S.Eliot's Four Quartets & the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock over forty years ago I had no idea what they were about, I just recognised beauty and truthful phrases in them. Having studied them regularly since, I still couldn't say that I fully understand them, but they've sensitised me to their language & pictures and I feel something truthful every time I re-read them.

It's similar with some of the metaphors of scripture, the Psalms especially & Christian art. Regularly re-reading & contemplating imagery & stories catch the imagination & we find relevance to our lives & present situations. We can't always understand why. That's part of the way that art can work alchemically on our perceptions, similar to the intuitive ways that God's Spirit sensitises us and reveals truths to us. Intuitive understanding can be as meaningful and true as cognitive understanding. Human minds develop, learn and are nourished in such a rich variety of ways!

ALISON WATT- STILL 2004

The invisible presence of God is evoked in this contemporary piece by Alison Watt in Edinburgh. In find it meaningful and theologically disquieting at the same time because it confronts a main difficulty in religious art: How much do we know and how much remains invisible; how much of our faith can we represent and how much shouldn't we try to represent? This veil suggests the truth that we in the church worship and pray in the presence of a great mystery.

The cross formed by the four panels also suggests that the presence of the Cross is always somewhere at the centre of God's mystery. The folds of cloth might also suggest grave-clothes that imply the presence of the promise of Resurrection at the centre of Christian belief.

Most of all the installation recalls that idea in our first talk that the presence of God is veiled from us like the coverings of the tent of the Tabernacle in the wilderness or the veil of the Temple. It's a simple yet profound image to remind us that we always live in a world where God's glory is veiled from us: *"We see through a glass darkly"* but trust that one day we may face God's truth *"face to face"* (I Cor.13:12)

ICONOSTASIS & VEIL

The veil acts in the church less as an altarpiece, more like an iconostasis in an orthodox church, veiling the most sacred aspects of worship from us. But the iconostasis is covered with images that represent key aspects of faith, reminding worshippers that Christianity is based on revelation. God is a personal force, no longer fully hidden. He has revealed aspects of himself throughout time: history, speaking through prophets, saints, scripture, our world, intuition and reason, most of all revealing himself through Jesus.

In the theological struggle that has become known in the Church history as the ‘Triumph of Orthodoxy’, after centuries of dispute about idolatry, Byzantine Councils accepted images in place of worship, precisely because God revealed himself physically through Jesus’ human form. Images were considered justified because Christ himself became a physical representation of God. But it had to be remembered that images could only be metaphors for theological truth; they were not to be regarded as real representations of the divine. That’s why the form of the icon was so proscribed and stylised. It was never to be confused with portraiture, but regarded as a visual representation of theology, a ‘door to perception’. For centuries since the acceptance of pictures, churches have used images from Christ’s life to emphasise, teach or illustrate specific aspects of faith.

ALISON WATT / DUCCIO MAIESTAS **Panels of Reverse**

The veil that separates human beings from God has been penetrated by God by all sorts of revelations and insights. God obviously wants us to understand aspects of himself, not to remain utterly mysterious, while we accept that such an enormous force is invisible and many aspects of God will never be knowable. In worship we are thanking and praising him for what we comprehend enough to be able to relate to God, love, worship and know his joy and peace.

God is a self-revealing mystery, so while his presence is veiled from us the veil over our understanding is partially lifted: Both St. Paul’s letters and the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasise that we can, with unveiled faces, come into the presence of God when we worship and can approach God with confidence because of Christ’s revelation to us. Artists throughout time have tried to use images and imagery to unveil or focus our thoughts to enable our limited minds to work to their full potential in imagining the glories and truths of faith.

When we try to reach into the full potential of that imagery God’s Spirit can lift the veil of our understanding even more and help us enjoy and find the most useful meanings that unveil God’s presence to our lives.

REMBRANDT ABRAHAM SACRIFICING ISAAC

We ended the first session with on the intimacy of Father’s relationship with their child. The hardest aspect of God for many modern western minds to accept is often the idea of human duty of obedience to God. Many defend their lack of faith by saying “Why should a loving God demand or need obedience and worship?” The Genesis story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac seems particularly cruel to contemporary sensibilities.

Abraham leaving Ur with his tribe & travelling to the Promised Land is about far more than a man journeying to found a Jewish homeland. At the story’s heart is the idea of a tribe changing its whole culture and beliefs. Abraham and his people are represented in Genesis as discovering truer ways of understanding & worshipping God. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac was once interpreted as a lesson for us that we should be totally obedient, whatever God asks. This faithful believer was willing to sacrifice his nation’s future hope, his only legitimate heir, because he was totally obedient to a God who could command anything from him. God’s grace sent the angel and revealed a sacrificial ram at the last minute but God could command such sacrifice from any of us.

The trouble with that interpretation is that the story imagines God could be emotionally cruel and insensitive. I’ve tried to paint this scene myself and imagined Abraham’s face torn apart by grief in incredible pain. It’s almost too painful to paint, like painting Christ on the Cross, which is said to have reduced Fra Angelico to tears every time he represented it (me too!) Imagine what Sarah would have thought if he’d slaughtered their longed-for son, only heir, the hope of a secure happy future!

Many modern theologians and anthropologists put a different interpretative slant on the story. They see the story as representing the change from a culture believing that ritual human sacrifice can appease the gods, to an understanding that God cares for us personally and that true sacrificial following of God is inner, not external. We see this change developing through the Hebrew Scriptures: Psalm 51:16-17 “*You do not delight in sacrifices.. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit*”. Malachi and Zechariah stress that God isn’t impressed or moved by sacrificial ritual but wants integrity of life and a heart faithful to God. Finally Christ’s sacrifice, once for all, abolished the need for physical sacrifice. Our sacrifice now is by true worship and true living.

UR – RAM CAUGHT IN THE THICKET **British Museum**

There’s another conundrum in the sacrifice of Abraham. When archaeologists in the 1920s to 40s under Sir Leonard Woolley unearthed Ur they found one of the

major religious symbols of the culture to be a ram apparently caught in a thicket. This in one of a pair of ceremonial rams in bushes. Whether this symbol, represented several times in the ruins of Ur, has any relevance to ram in Abraham's sacrifice we can't be sure, but it does seem quite a coincidence. Did the ram in a thicket have special religious significance in the story?

REMBRANDT ABRAHAM SACRIFICE

One problem for our witness is that many people outside the church imagine that believers are expecting from them a superstitious, relationship of unthinking obedience to God. Christians sometimes talk as though we follow a God who demands self-sacrifice rather than always having our own good at heart and giving us choice. Too often Churches have exerted power over people by threatening them with a vengeful God who will zap us if we don't obey Church rules. That's not the God Malachi, Isaiah or Jesus reveal, who wants a relationship of truth and care with the whole community, not reasonless sacrifice. Churches are sometimes criticised as hypocritical, expecting people to be self-sacrificial & holy while covering up unholiness in our own clergy and building ecclesiastical power and wealth on people's sacrificial offerings. We need to be more careful with our Gospel!

GRÜNEWALD - ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE

A problem with the way we traditionally taught about Jesus' sacrifice is similar... Some outside Christianity imagine a cruel God who would even sacrifice his son in the most painful way: what then would he expect of me if I gave my life to following him? Would he demand similar sacrifice? Many of us will have been sacrificial for our faith out of genuine love. We'll also have gone through stages of our spiritual lives when we've feared God's character & expectations of us. For centuries, some believers have been treated as doormats by the Church, in hair shirts humbly serving God, thinking God would purify them through suffering; they did not expect to enjoy fulfilled life here on earth, but believed that we need to wait patiently until heaven. That's awkward to justify theologically. God made a world that he looked on and 'saw that it was good'. It may now need rigorous healing, but surely God gave us life here to enjoy and work at healing by righteous living. Earthly life is not a 'purgatorial stage to pass through on the way to perfection'. Surely God gave us life here to enjoy righteously to the full. If God didn't want life here to be fulfilled, why create such a beautiful world and so many meaningful gifts for us to use and revel in?

FRA ANGELICO - ANNUNCIATION

Images that speak to me are often very different from those I paint myself. I paint expressively, often painfully. That speaks to some, but often God communicates

in the 'still small voice.' It's often quieter paintings that speak to active people, encourage us to stop, quieten our minds, listen and think, and transform our consciousness.

I spoke for about an hour about this painting at the Mirfield Companion's Day a year ago so I won't repeat that material about Dominican spirituality and their use of art in prayer. But this painting has continued to work on my mind since. For the reformed Dominican monks of San Marco it wasn't just an image to remind them to pray to their patron saint Mary. They passed it about 30 times a day and were trained to reverence it whenever they passed. It was intended as a constant reminder that Mary is to be our example. If they and we, like Mary, remained faithful to God, prayed in their cell in spirit and in truth, emulated her humility and willingness to serve, studied and preached faithfully and truthfully & remained pure in life and intention, God might reveal himself to us as God revealed himself to faithful Mary. God might use us to reveal himself to the needy world around us, God might reveal himself to the world through OUR lives as he did through Mary and build his Kingdom through us.

Isn't that that we want in our lives and our churches? Our pursuit of spiritual truth, to know God and grow isn't just for OUR good; it should be so that God might use us to transform the world. It's easy to say that – very different to believe and live it. A Catholic friend said the other day that he feels 'a lapsed Christian' more often than he does a faithful Christ-follower. Me too! Most of us fail. But here, as for the Dominican monks an apparently very simple image reminds us of what faithful Christ-following looks like and can achieve.

Mary's loggia would have been recognised by any monk living in Florence: it's just like Sangallo's cloister and library architecture in their monastery and Brunelleschi's monastic hospital nearby. Mary is in THEIR setting, her simple cell in the background could be their own individual cell, or our own prayer corner. The message is clear: devote our spiritual reflection and prayer to living with this purity, dedication, holiness and willingness to follow God's lead and God might change the world through us.

ROBERT CAMPIN - MERODE ALTARPIECE

That is emphasised again in this small private painting designed for personal prayer in a secular home. The Merode family are a couple looking on at a spiritual encounter happening in their home.

Behind them Isaiah stands by the gate ready to prophetically unveil God's son and his message to them.

In their recognisably Flemish home Mary is devotionally reading her breviary as they were encouraged to do daily. So fine is the detail that we know the very book that she was reading : the family volume of readings & prayers still survives.

Mary is accompanied by an enormous wealth of symbolic imagery. She is a clay jar which Christ the pure Prince of Peace, symbolised by the lily, is about to enter and transform. This particular Delft jar, is covered by Hebrew words denoting Mary's Jewish origins. Mary sits in a chair carved with lions of Judah, who will find their fulfilment in the Christ-child, Jesus comes gently, with understanding, as scripture says "a smouldering wick he will not snuff out." (Isa.42:3; Matt.12:20).

Mary is surrounded by objects that reflect sincere spirituality: a prayer shawl, the water container suggesting that she keeps herself pure. The open window symbolises her openness to God's revelation. Her missal's leaves seem to be being blown by the wind of the spirit, which is also fanning her humble wick, which is glowing.

Into the scene the embryo Jesus flies on beams of light, carrying his cross, the ultimate reason why he came, to bring salvation to this couple and their family who will pray at this picture and reflect on faith in a room like this. (Theologians prescribing Counter-Reformation art later discouraged representations like this of Christ coming to Mary's womb as being unrealistic representations of theology.)

All this is happening in the setting of the Merode's own town – outside Joseph's workshop window we see their town square. Joseph is faithfully using the woodworker's tools of his day (perhaps drawn from the workshop making the artist Robert Campin's frames & panels or his own family workshop). What Joseph is making is also significant. A completed example sits on the windowsill – a mousetrap. Joseph's mousetraps are symbolic of what Christ is going to do through his coming, destroy the influence of rodent sin.

It's a beautiful domestic scene, full of social detail about the Flemish life of the day, but the emphasis is not on that. The Merode family are being reminded that here in everyday life Christ can be found and can live in them and through them. He can help them grow through prayer, devotional reading and contemplation, he can help them defeat sin in their own lives and he can help them, not only prevent sin from entering from the outside world but he can help this merchant & his wife and family influence their world. It's a reminder to us that we can spiritually influence our world.

This painting is resonant with interesting details of social history, but it reminds us that our homes should be similar places of spiritual significance and influence,

as we are meant to play our part in building the kingdom of God in our communities, not just developing our own spirituality.

"But", I can hear my heart and probably yours saying: "I'm an unworthy influence, look at all my failures!" Me too!

REMBRANDT - WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY

Rembrandt made this small painting also for a domestic home to convey a message of forgiveness through the story of the woman taken in Adultery.

Most artists have expressed the story with more dramatic action. I've tried to paint the scene twice, showing Jesus stepping in to protect the woman. Many painters have represented this with extravagant gestures and focused on the deeply weeping woman and the accuser's violent threats. The relationship between the woman and Jesus' intervention is often suggested more emphatically, as is his showing up of the hypocrisy of those condemning her.

ROGER WAGNER - WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY

That's seen in this recent painting of the scene by Roger Wagner, reflecting the tragic executions of those who go against social laws in the Middle East today. The foreground crowd reach up with their cameras and cell-phones to record & post the event – a terrible indictment on contemporary society.

REMBRANDT - WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY

Rembrandt invariably chooses the moment in a story or an angle from which to view it that carries the most spiritual meaning. Her only one Pharisee is active in condemning; Christ stands erect and tall. All the others tower over her in disapproval, waiting tensely for Jesus' words in order to condemn him too.

By taking a wide view. Rembrandt sets the whole encounter in context. The woman has been dragged to the Temple and is dominated by the crowd's 'righteous indignation'. This perspective emphasises how the whole dark weight of religious and social laws is bearing down upon her. Look at the dark portals of shadows above. She's small and unimportant by comparison with the splendour of the overpowering architecture, the light of the temple & whatever liturgy, synodical or legalistic debate is happening behind.

Rembrandt almost represents her as the innocent in the scene. Surprisingly she's wearing white: you'd expect her to be clothed in crimson to emphasise her sin but she is about to be cleansed by Christ. The elder standing oppressively over her is in heavy red robes. Rembrandt may have been thinking of the social stigma he and his housekeeper were under. Their relationship was unconventional. His wife Saskia had died; he had no money of his own - his finances were totally

dependent on his wife's legacy. If he remarried her money would be settled on their son. Should Rembrandt he remarry? Through being thrown together in supporting him & the child, he developed passion for Hendricke, his housekeeper. He couldn't marry her, but only live together if he wanted to survive financially. Self-righteous churchmen withdraw their artistic patronage, brought Rembrandt & his housekeeper before a morality tribunal, smeared his name socially & condemned them.

That's one of the social contexts of this painting, but it's far more significant than just Rembrandt's allegory of his own experiences. He had a sincere, committed faith. The painting is partially about our responsibility to be humanly loving, not legalistic, and to forgive as Christ forgave. Jesus saved the woman's life and called her to "go and sin no more".

This isn't a painting for a church; it's designed for a domestic interior. Those living in the house are intended to apply this scene to themselves: Not to be hypocritical in condemning others in whose shoes we don't walk. Not to make the Church or their individual faiths into too much of a dominant institution which doesn't allow for, or understand that ordinary people around us are only human and fail as much as we do.

By taking this long perspective onto the scene I find myself thinking about the role of the Church in society and question whether we are like (or are perceived to be like) this impersonal splendidly adorned but dark oppressive vault, or a place of true moral light which offers people freedom and helps them go and sin no more rather than condemning them and making situations worse. This is a very patriarchal condemnation: there are few other women in this scene and they are very subservient. Community elders condemned Rembrandt and Hendricke. As usual in paintings of this scene there appears to be no representation of the man who was the partner in adultery and no condemnation of him in the story.

The scene makes me wonder how would my church compare with this?

- Are we forgiving enough?
- Do we discourage sin winsomely and help people to struggle against besetting addictions?
- Are we a place where people feel loved and able to confess anything, knowing that they will not be rejected and be able to be restored and know the freedom that forgiveness brings?
- Individual communities might be forgiving and encouraging, but does the Church of England as a whole, the rulings of our synods, or our dioceses give the impression that we are more like this oppressive institution that

belittles people rather than raising up the individual sinner or failure and supporting them to truer discipleship?

- Do we show, as Christ did, that we value the individual, helping and loving them to true freedom before the institution and enforcing its rules?

Art like this can hold a mirror up to our situation and ask what we can learn from comparing it with our own situation now.

MEL GIBSON THE PASSION

Our message is about releasing people, to live fulfilled lives, not oppressing them. Representations of Christ's crucifixion have been used to oppress as well as to suggest the release of salvation. One problem I find with Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* is that the figure on the Cross has been beaten so much (way beyond the horrors of Grunewald) that through all the gore it is hard to recognise Christ as a man of love, offering himself for our release. The branch of American Catholic spirituality that influenced Gibson implies that if we had not sinned so greatly perhaps Christ wouldn't have had to endure quite so much suffering. That's not defensible theologically. It represents retribution over-literally suggesting that it is US personally who are still causing the magnitude of all Christ's suffering. This can oppress us into regarding ourselves as valueless sinners responsible for Christ's pain - a mediaeval idea, very useful for subduing, not freeing people.

The true message of the Cross is that God loves and values us so much he was willing to endure all this to free us!

EARLY IMAGES OF CROSS

The Cross is a central event of Christianity. Although salvation was the central feature of early church preaching, the earliest Church images focused on Resurrection and positive symbols like the Anchor, Fish, Good Shepherd or Last Supper. They didn't initially represent Christ crucified. This is understandable as to Romans and Jews crucifixion shamed and cursed the culprit, it could hardly be used to illustrate the Christian hope.

The Cross only came into common usage, as here, in churches after the empire's Christianisation & the removal of crucifixion as a common torture. The Cross was then included in other scenes from of Christ's life.

DUCCIO MAIESTAS - VERSO – THE SALVATION NARRATIVE

As in this later series it was an important part of the narrative of salvation alongside Christ's miracles and resurrection.

SUFFERING CROSS AND GLORIOUS CROSS COMPARED

Later images of the Cross designed for contemplation and devotion represented it in two distinct ways: images of triumph or suffering. The Triumphant Cross with Christ's arms stretched victoriously stressed Christ's achievement of Salvation. The Suffering Cross with a bending, more disfigured Christ came later, especially popular around the time of the Black Death, as it helped believers recognise Christ's empathy with our human predicament and needs.

GRÜNEWALD

The Isenheim altarpiece is perhaps the most obvious example of the suffering Christ empathising with us. It was commissioned for a monastic hospital chapel where monks cared for sufferers of terrible diseases, particularly skin and neurological problems like Ergotism or St Anthony's Fire commonly contracted by eating mouldy grain. Ergotism caused horrific muscle cramps, intense nerve pain and death in agony, similar to the twisting figure on the Cross. The altarpiece reminded patients and nursing monks that God identifies with human suffering and had gone through agony as intensely as theirs. It offered them empathy, hope and salvation beyond their present suffering. This realism without beauty spiritually disturbed me for years until I recognised that this is emphasising that Christ became a real incarnate man, flesh and blood, sent from God for people who suffer intensely. This is an image of intense love, as represented in some of the Pietist writers or the spirituality of Richard Rolle's Meditations on the Passion. It's an image which might be applied to God's care for a parent whose child has been blown up in Aleppo, a doctor dealing with terrorist casualties in Nice, Paris or Brussels, a soldier going through trauma after horrific experiences in war. But I hope that today our insights into psychology might help us to support people to know God's care for them in rather more subtle, gentler ways and more loving images. God knows the horrors we experience because he too experienced it; he offers healing and life with him in the dimension beyond despite anything we go through.

MCKILLOP WAY OF THE CROSS

Too often my own paintings of the Cross made the mistake of being too real in representing pain. My 2003 'Stations of the Cross in a Suffering world' was painted in response to the Iraq War— one of the few times I've painted with specifically political intent. I felt that not enough was done to avoid war and wanted to compare Christ innocently giving his life with politicians taking the easy way to gain popularity rather than working for peace.

I've since come to the conclusion that I need to paint images which are less overt, draw in the viewer more subtly and express faith more quietly. I'm

working at the moment on a series of 25 more subtle, understated stations of the Passion which I'm first showing in Lichfield Cathedral next Lent.

VELASQUEZ –DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRIST & THE HUMAN SOUL.

Velasquez managed subtle intensity in our National Gallery painting of the soul contemplating Christ's suffering.

It is less exaggerated and more realistic than Grunewald.

PEDRO DE MENA & GREGORIO FERNANDEZ SCULPTURE

It follows the intense realism of contemporary Spanish sculpture like that of Pedro de Mena and Gregorio Fernandez which followed Counter-Reformation teaching that art should present faith realistically and stir our emotions spiritually.

MURILLO AND VELASQUEZ' CRUCIFIXION

Velasquez and Murillo, like Caravaggio's style which influenced them, stirred emotions and faith by presenting Christ as beautiful – a spiritual ideal to long to hold onto for salvation.

VELASQUEZ - DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRIST & THE HUMAN SOUL.

They are influenced by gentler spiritual contemplative ideas of Francisco da Osuna's Spiritual Alphabet, St Teresa or John of the Cross. It doesn't hit you in the face as many baroque tours- de-forces were designed to do. Rather than responding with immediacy we are asked, as the angel asks the child-figure of the human soul, to respond with intense intimacy, to contemplate quietly, taking time to pray. It's encouraging a spirituality which asks us to look, feel and quietly reflect on its relevance to us.

Christ is engaging our spiritual gaze. Bernard of Clairvaux, Dominic and reforming Carmelite, Dominican and Franciscan theologians encouraged the development of the spiritual gaze - to contemplate imagery from the depth of our being, letting our souls & spirits interact with them to find their meaning for us.

Murillo & Ribalta ST. FRANCIS EMBRACING THE CROSS

We see that spiritual gaze represented literally in these paintings by Murillo and Ribalta: the saint contemplates the crucifixion with such intensity that he feels the love of Christ embracing him and reaching out to the world through him.

Today many might consider this over-emotional. Christ is handsome, not plain-featured because Counter-Reformation rules for church art encouraged the use of beauty to attract worshippers' attention, rather than ugly over-exaggeration of emotion.

VELASQUEZ DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRIST & THE HUMAN SOUL.

In the Grunewald Crucifixion the viewer was meant to recognise that Christ is suffering like us, or even more than us, so see him as identifying with OUR pain. But here the Spanish spirituality intends us to recognise that it is Christ's love for us which has brought him here. God has come down to our level and recognises what it is to be human. He redeems us as a pure representative of true humanity, not disfigured by sin.

He is not shown as Isaiah's Man of Sorrows, beaten beyond the semblance of humanity, (as in Mel Gibson's film.) His look is God's love, in human form, offering himself for care of us. Only Christ's expression and a small trickle of blood suggest the pain he is undergoing for us. This in nothing like the reality of a Roman flagellation by 39 lashes – he'd be half dead. Yet for me the intensity of emotion Velasquez manages to convey encourages a more spiritual response in me than watching pain.

The angel and the pure human soul dressed as a child in azure blue may seem kitschy to contemporary 21st Century eyes, but they would not have appeared so to Velasquez's contemporaries. This is the meditative, purified soul who John of the Cross imagined in Spirit climbing Mount Carmel, experiencing the Dark Night, contemplating the Trinity and Salvation in his Romance poems, or the soul in Teresa of Avila's interior castle adoring Christ and all he has achieved.

The light beam from Christ's ear to the soul is unusual. Velasquez replaced a conventional halo with a crowning glow & a ray directed towards the human heart through the praying hands. It may refer to some specific spiritual teaching we've lost, similar to late mediaeval belief that the Spirit enters us through our ears. This ray of light suggests that through contemplation our souls can be directly linked to Christ – as in Francisco da Osuna's teaching on contemplative prayer. Contemplation is being shown as almost sacramental, implying that true prayer is as real as the Eucharist; bringing us into Christ's presence & embracing us with the benefits of Salvation.

The angel and the human soul are like intermediaries encouraging US to look at Jesus, to identify with his suffering for us and place our trust and faith in him.

RESURRECTIONS

Occasionally when we're open & creative, something comes spiritually alive as Velasquez picture of contemplation suggests. We're a Community of the Resurrection so I finish with an image of the Resurrection. New life is our future hope and Christ's resurrection is the source of our trust. I've attempted to paint the Resurrection several times – I'm presently working on another. I've a hunch

it's the hardest subject in Christian art. We don't know what happened at the tomb, what Christ's followers saw or what his resurrection body was like.

So every image of Resurrection is false, just a metaphor for Christ's mysterious return and a sign of God's promise of renewal to us.

Iain McKillop - RESURRECTION FOR KATHY

This particular painting took me about 3 years, wrestling with the image, putting it away in frustration, coming back to it. It was my first attempt at the subject. I determined to complete it in memory of my close friend, Kathy Keay who had just died of breast cancer.

Iain McKillop - CRUCIFIXION

I'd expressed my confusion at her death in a very black Crucifixion: Christ's Cry of Dereliction - "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Since I painted it I've come to read Jesus use of Psalm 22 on the Cross differently, as a positive prayer of trust, not a sense of abandonment. But at the time I painted this image, I imagined him caught between uncertainty, hope and trust.

Iain McKillop - CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION TOGETHER

I needed to paint this Resurrection to balance the pain and paint Christ's promise of Kathy's renewed life and the hope it gave me.

SKETCH BOOK LEAVES

I didn't know how to do it. I filled my sketch-book with potential images. Finally deciding on the composition.

GRÜNEWALD'S ISENHEIM RESURRECTION and my figure.

I imagined viewing Grünewald's Resurrection from below. (You see this image when his Isenheim Crucifixion opens up – symbolic in itself – an image of life emerging from an image of agony and death.) In Grünewald Christ pops up from the tomb like a jack-in-the-box or ejected by a booster pack. It's awkward, but an amazing feat of the imagination for a just-post-mediaeval artist's mind.

RESURRECTION

I tried to imagine Christ energetically climbing arduous steps from death, having achieved the assurance of eternal life for us. Death could not keep God down; instead Jesus pushes aside the heavy stone of the tomb letting the light of hope radiate into us. He's brought the souls of the dead with him and together they emerge into the new life we are promised. I didn't understand what I was painting at the time...certainly not when I drew it and began painting. Only over

the 3 years it took complete the canvas did I begin to realise further meanings I wanted suggest in it, particularly to see it as a metaphor for our own resurrection.

I've continued to learn from it as I've exhibited it over several years since. A midwife told me she interpreted it as birth. A woman who'd lost her child imagined what his renewed life might be like in a different dimension.

Producing or meditating on art can be a contemplative process. As you engage with it – writing, looking, painting, creating or listening to music, new ideas emerge. Sometimes they surprise you, sometimes they corroborate or reiterate things you've thought already, sometimes they remind you of things you've forgotten or see and interpret now in new light. Ultimately we're all trying to give life to our faith and find what life is there for us and for others.

This picture now regularly challenges me about whether I trust Christ's promises as certain as this:

- Are we making the most of the life he's given us physically and spiritually?
- Is God's Spirit energising our life, ministry & witness as enthusiastically as this life-filled image suggests?
- Is the light of Christ radiating into us like this & vitalising us?

Often church can feel stagnant. I'm not convinced, as often as I should be, that the worldwide Church I serve and feel part of, wants or is trying to be the alive Kingdom of God. Too often Churches, synods, diocese and individual church communities seem far more interested in being self-sustaining, self-protecting, self-promoting, self-regulating institutions. We rarely depend as much as we should upon the guidance of God's Spirit, preferring reason and humanistic leadership principles. We'll never transform our needy world by mediocre, self-centred or untrue spirituality. God's true Kingdom will never be built of anything untrue. Christ offered the woman at the well living water that would well up to eternal life. He encouraged worship in Spirit & Truth. Christ offers SO much more than legalism or wishy-washy shadows of spirituality and worship that we sometimes accept in our churches: He offers us what this image tries to express metaphorically - Eternal Light and Eternal Life!

As we go out from here today let's do what is happening here in this picture - spiritually-push away any weighty stones that prevent the full light of God shining in and bring full life to us. We trust that Resurrection is true.

We are called to responsibly bringing this, Christ's light and hope to a dark, needy world. We need to live by this light and help Christ, through us to bring life and hope to others.

QUOTE:

I finish with a quote from the theologian Helen Oppenheim about how we all, in our variety, can be images of the true God to the world: *"We are not trying to pronounce about what God can or cannot be, but about how God can be found in our world... God's people have the hopeful responsibility of being the presence, the 'findability' of God upon earth... Our diversity should enable God to be found in all areas of life in our world... The word multi-faceted comes to mind... The Church may be a prism breaking up the white light of God's dazzling majesty."*
[Theology 93 1990 p.133-141]

For the world to coming to understand who God depends to a large extent on each one of US truly being fragments of God-like truth: People should know what God is truly like through us, our lives, our witness, and our community. The Church of which we are members needs to live as the true image of our unseen God!
AMEN