

## Blessing of Icon

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For those of us who live in France, August is the month when parents have the privilege, indeed some would even say the pleasure, of having grandchildren to stay. Ours return home this afternoon and it seems that for the past four weeks my life has been turned upside down! Consequently, the books on Icons which I had borrowed from the library have remained unopened and the learned sermon which Father Gareth was no doubt anticipating when he invited me to preach today, and which you as a congregation deserve, has simply not materialised!

As some of you will recall, I was Rector of a small North Cornish Parish in the early 1970's. In the neighbouring Parish there was a mildly eccentric gentleman who appeared with the same regularity each summer as the swallows. I say 'mildly eccentric' because, like most of us he wore a pair of socks – but they were not always a matching pair – something about which he seemed completely oblivious.

In my Church in St. Mabyn we had a very fine painting 'The Deposition of Christ' attributed to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Renaissance artist Jacopa da Ponte Bassano, no doubt brought back by the Squire of the Parish during his Grand Tour. I walked in one day to find John (and by this time some of you will have guessed I am referring to John Betjeman) standing, looking up at the painting and muttering 'sense of the numinous' – 'sense of the numinous'. It transpired that he had been commissioned by the B.B.C. to write a broadcast talk on 'Anglican Liturgy'

which, in the early 1970's was very topical. After all, we had had the Red Series 1, followed by the Blue Series 2 and were now into the Green Series 3.

Whilst much of Betjeman's subsequent talk was concerned with the mystic of the language of the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorised Version of the Bible, he reminded his listeners that Stained Glass Windows, Wall Murals, Painting, Icons, Statues, Vestments and Altar Frontals all played a part in creating a 'Holy Place' where, as the Epiphany hymn puts it, we can bow down and worship God 'in the beauty of holiness'. In the creation of these 'holy places' icons play a unique role. So, to icons, the word '*eikōn*' is simply Greek for picture.

Because of its distinctive art form we all recognise an icon when we see one and probably think of Russia or Greece. The expert, however, by looking at the style of the art and the colour of the pigments will be able to distinguish between Ethiopian, Coptic, Macedonian and Cretan icons. Ours of St. Bartholomew is typically Armenian with its blue, purple and deep Indian red colouring, chosen quite deliberately for it was in Armenia that St. Bartholomew was martyred. However, from whatever region of the Orthodox world an icon comes from the essential elements used in its creation remain the same:

**Wood:** Symbolising the bare wood of the Cross and the wood used by Karen comes from a pew which was in Trinity Church Jersey and is over 100 years old.

**Fabric:** Usually cotton or linen symbolic of the shroud which covered our Lord's body.

**Gesso or stone:** Symbolic of Christ's tomb.

There is much more symbolism but those three are essential to all icons. But we need to ask ourselves, what makes an icon different from a painting, apart from the fact that icons remain unsigned by the artist?

Well, come in imagination with me to St. Paul's Cathedral in London. In the north transept we find William Holman Hunt's well known, and by many, much loved, painting of 'Jesus The Light of the World'. But continue just a little further (I know this is beginning to sound like Mussorgsky's 'Pictures at an Exhibition') and you come to two icons, those of St. Peter and St. Paul and in front of each of the icons is a lighted candle. Why, because we **view** a picture but **venerate** an icon and if you forget everything else about this sermon remember that: view a picture – venerate an icon. At one level the veneration of icons was due to the fact that, unlike stained glass windows or wall murals, they were portable. You could have one at home, take it with you on a journey or indeed, as in Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' see it ahead of you leading the army into battle.

At a deeper and more profound level, however, an icon is venerated, and here it is necessary to use a bit of early Church theology which is summed up as '**The prototype is present in its representation**'. This is, put simply, asserting that St. Bartholomew is himself present in the icon and this is a way of thinking which has theological overtones with the Holy Eucharist and Christ being present in the bread and the wine. If that is so, then it places the creator of icons, like the

priest, in a very special relationship which needed to be formalised by the Church once the creation, the writing, of icons, moved out of the monasteries. Of the wide variety of pronouncements by the Church let me just quote one from the Stoglav Council of 1551:

The painter of icons should be full of humility, gentleness and piety; he should avoid frivolous talk and pleasure. He should be of peaceful disposition and know not envy. He should neither drink, nor rob nor steal (here in the English translation steal is spelt steel). He should visit his spiritual fathers frequently and inform them of his conduct, and fast and pray according to their precepts and instructions. He should be pure and decorous and avoid all immodesty and restlessness'.

However, a pious mind alone is not enough for the Council goes on to say that being able to represent shape and resemblance is a gift from God but 'he to whom God has denied this gift should be forbidden to paint icons, lest he offend God by his clumsiness'. So it was, and still is the case, that being an Iconographer is a very special calling. Here there is no place for mistresses to pose as madonnas for 'The prototype is present in its representation'.

The icon which Karen has *written* of St. Bartholomew is full of symbolism – let me just draw your attention to one small detail. The name Bartholomew means 'Son of Tolmai' a Hebrew name indicating his Hebrew descent. This Karen has symbolised by the fig leaf border and, if you look closely you will see that on St.

Bartholomew's feet are embedded within the border – thus placing him firmly within the ancient tradition.

We celebrate this year the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Consecration of this Church. One of the things which Karen seeks to achieve, through her God-given talent as an Iconographer, is to bring the Saints back into the Church. If you look at the old street maps of Dinard you will see that we are describe as being the *Temple Protestant*. Later, but not really until the 1980's we become *L' église anglicane* but, from now onwards it will surely be *L' église de Saint Barthélémy*.

So in conclusion with our icon, and indeed with all icons, we can say, as one Russian writer does:

'The transcendental solemnity of the holy faces, the solemn ritual gestures of the hands when administering the blessing, and the poise of the movements, all silently proclaim the gospel and the joyous message, the timeless validity of which we must strive to understand'.

*Preached at the Patronal Festival Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

*28<sup>th</sup> August, 2011*

