

‘He is the image of the invisible God’ *Col 1:15*

So begins our reading this morning from the Letter to the Colossians. It is a passage rich in meaning as the writer begins to explore the relationship between Jesus and God – Jesus, born of Mary, crucified, risen, ascended, glorified.

I want to explore some of the words the writer uses as we begin to grasp what this Jesus, this God means to us in the here and now of this life we live. I’m going to begin with those two words we translate as ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’. The Greek Paul was writing in is in many ways more nuanced than the English of the text we have before us. Greek would have a number of words that we would translate as the single word ‘see’ – from the bare seeing or not seeing to the deeper seeing as comprehending, or understanding. So the word we have translated as ‘invisible’ ἀοράτος, has, as its root, the word ὁραω, which carries with it this idea of seeing as understanding, as comprehending.

So ‘he is the image of the invisible God’; God beyond my understanding.

‘in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible ....’; things I understand and things I don’t. Seen, yet not seen; knowable yet unknowable – we get a sense of the otherness, the height, the depth, the length, the breadth, the majesty of Almighty God. We get a sense of what the Psalmist was talking about when he declared:

- 4 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, ♦  
the moon and the stars that you have ordained,
- 5 What is man, that you should be mindful of him; ♦  
the son of man, that you should seek him out?
- 10 *O Lord our governor, ♦*  
*how glorious is your name in all the world!*

*Psalm 8 (BCP2004)*

Seen, yet not seen; knowable yet unknowable – sometimes it as we hold two apparent opposites together that we can begin to get a deeper understanding of the truth we seek. To take a simple example in the field of physics, as we look at the phenomenon of light. Sometimes it seems to behave more like a wave, like a wave on the surface of the water – on other occasions we can best understand it in terms of a stream of particles – neither on their own do full justice to the concept of light. So in our understanding of God, language is of necessity partial, it cannot do full justice to the God, to the Other we seek to comprehend.

But Paul does not leave us with the simple knowable and unknowable, seen and unseen – he talks of Jesus as the ‘image of the invisible God’. The word ‘image’ is a translation of the Greek word *εικων*; a word from which we derive our word ‘icon’. The icon, this particular style of religious art, occupies a central place in the spirituality of the Orthodox Church. Icons have been called windows to heaven or doorways to the sacred. When you are standing in front of an icon, it is as if you are looking through a window into the heavenly world of the mystery.

The figure of Jesus as the image, the icon, the window through whom we experience the Father. We read in John's account of the Last Supper, that meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died.

<sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" <sup>10</sup> Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? *John 14:8 ff*

‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.’ In the person of Jesus, in his life and teaching, in his self emptying service, in his death and resurrection we come face to face with God.

Paul goes on to talk of his vocation, his ministry of making Christ known:

to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup>the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints.

The mystery that has now been revealed to the saints ..... Then he proceeds to enlarge on this as he continues:

<sup>27</sup>To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you,

How great are the glories of the riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you. Which is Christ in you ... these words have been rattling around in my mind. To go back to our thoughts of Jesus as the image, the icon of the invisible God; the one in whom and through whom we see something of the Father; we are called to be ones in whom and through whom others see and experience something of Christ. To go back to the language of the

icon, we are called to be windows into Christ. To use the lovely language of St Patrick's Breastplate:

Christ be the vision  
In eyes that see me  
In ears that hear me  
Christ ever be *Hymn 611*