

# Contents

1	The long look.....	6
2	About icons .....	11
3	To Russia.....	27
4	The hospitality of Abraham.....	37
5	The circle of love .....	45
6	Exploring the Trinity.....	58
7	Joining in the dance .....	70
8	Now and for ever.....	85
	Notes.....	91

## The long look

The surgeon spoke: ‘I will operate to repair the macular hole in your left eye.’ That was good news but he went on to say that I would need to convalesce by lying face downwards for a fortnight with occasional short breaks. This, he explained, would enable the gas bubble injected into the back of my eye to stay in place and protect the surgery.

I was shocked. The idea of lying face downwards for such a long time was daunting. I am an active person and being still for a fortnight, let alone being face down, presented me with quite a challenge. However, with the help of my husband Paul and a friend, we made an extension to a wooden garden bed and cut a hole in it for my face. Padded well with pillows, it was actually quite comfortable, but I found it boring to have to stare at the carpet, so I asked for my favourite icon to be placed on the floor, where I could see it.

Andrei Rublev’s icon of the Holy Trinity was my constant companion for the fortnight. I found myself drawn into the serenity and harmony of the three seated figures. The longer I gazed, the more engaged I became with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and all that they represented. That is not surprising, because icons are intended to be windows on to the divine.

In a strange way, I felt a certain reluctance to pack away the bed and resume vertical living at the end of two weeks. I had been amazed by the kindness of friends who cooked

meals for us and came to visit us, and I had delighted in the company of the icon, which had a very calming effect on me. What could have been a difficult experience had presented me with unexpected gifts.

I think it is true to say that whatever we look at for a long time has an impact upon us. I find that to be true when I visit an art gallery. The painting that I view the longest is the one I can recall best after I have left the gallery. I now prefer to be selective and spend more time in front of a few paintings than try to look at a greater number in a more superficial way.

Among my favourite books is Sister Wendy Beckett's *The Gaze of Love*.<sup>1</sup> In it she invites her readers to take their time to savour the paintings she has chosen, most of them contemporary, and to be led into discovery and on into prayer. To begin with, I find that I can't get anything much out of them, but then, as I practise patience and stay with the image, I start to see beyond the initial impression. With the aid of Sister Wendy's thoughts and my own, I am drawn into a deeper meaning, which leads to prayer.

## Looking back

Very often, the pictures or photographs that surrounded us when we were children continue to have an influence on us. I remember being intrigued by a self-portrait of my great-great-great-grandfather that hung on the landing of my grandparents' home. Wherever I walked, his eyes would follow me. I would try to outrun him but those eyes were always watching me. Our children and grandchildren have been equally fascinated by him as he has now taken up residence in our home.

When I was eight, I was sent away to a boarding school in the Yorkshire Dales. It was a very unhappy experience: I felt trapped and isolated, far from home and from those I loved. I vividly remember a picture that hung in my classroom. It was in black and white, a print taken from an engraving, and it depicted Jesus as a shepherd climbing down a rock face to rescue a sheep perched precariously on a ledge. The sheep was caught in brambles and looked very pathetic. The shepherd was reaching out, one hand holding on to his staff for balance and the other gently outstretched towards the sheep. Day after day I would look at that scene, and even today I can still see it clearly in my mind's eye. It made a great impression on me. As a child, I may not have understood why it resonated so strongly with me, but, in retrospect, I imagine that I was subconsciously identifying myself with that lost sheep. I, too, wanted to be found and rescued.

As a student in London, I developed a personal faith in Jesus Christ. The picture I remember from that period is Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World*. The artist has painted the figure of Jesus standing outside a closed door. The figure wears a simple crown on his head, denoting kingship, but it is entwined with a circlet of thorns. He is dressed in a plain white robe with a richly embroidered cloak over his shoulders. He carries a lantern in his hand that sheds light on his face and also on the weeds growing outside the door, which gives the impression of having remained closed for a very long time. He patiently knocks, hoping to be welcomed in—for there is no handle on the outside of the door, only a knocker. This painting was brought to my attention by a friend, who patiently listened to my questioning and was able to direct me towards Jesus, the Saviour and Light of the World. I made a commitment of faith, responding to his knock and opening

the door of my life to him. I kept a copy of the painting in my room as a reminder of the transaction that had taken place. I had been found and rescued.

In the later years of my life, Rublev's icon has come to mean a great deal to me. It invites me to be with the Trinity—at home with them. It reminds me of some words that Jesus spoke to his disciples on the eve of his death. He said, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them' (John 14:23). The scene has a sense of home about it as the three figures sit around the table.

I have become fascinated by the icon of the Holy Trinity. It has led me on a journey of discovery not only about the icon itself but also about iconography in general (of which I was very ignorant), and on into what it means to be caught up in the life of the Trinity. This book is an attempt to share that journey with you; no doubt you will make your own discoveries along the way.

At the end of each chapter, I will provide some suggestions for further thought that you can use if you choose to do so.

### – For reflection –

*Whatever we gaze at for a long time, we remember.*

*Can you think of a painting, a photograph, a quotation or an image that has been important to you, maybe as a child or in later years?*

*What impression does/did it make on you and why do you think that is so?*

## Note

If you would like to have your own print of the icon, you could find one on the internet or in a book, or you could buy one from a Christian bookshop.

## About icons

Like a box of Liquorice Allsorts, we human beings come in a range of colours, shapes and types. Some of us are cerebral people, who live mainly through the intellect and relate to concepts and analysis, while some are emotional and live quite a lot by feelings; yet others are highly aware of their senses and respond to creation, colour and the visual. Then there are those who live predominantly by their intuition, not knowing quite how they form their opinions but proving uncannily accurate in their hunches. Some of us are extraverts, finding energy in being with other people, and others are more introverted, with a rich interior life. The extraverts need to speak in order to think, but the introverts need to think in order to speak. We are, of course, a mixture of all these types to a greater or lesser degree. It is just that we have preferences in the way that we relate to the world and its people.

It was not until I was in my 50s that I began to be aware of who I really am. Having had a poor education (although it was paid for), I had spent years feeling academically inferior, unable to be articulate or take part in debate because I did not have the confidence to express my opinions. As a result, I became a listener—which has, incidentally, stood me in good stead ever since. When the children left home, there was that awkward space in my life—I believe it is called the ‘empty nest syndrome’—and I was not sure who I was or what my role in life would be in future years. I enlisted for a counsellor

training course, in which, quite apart from learning how to be alongside others, I began to discover and, for the first time, value the intuitive side of my character. It was like a key turning in a lock. A door opened, that I could pass through to live in greater freedom. I didn't have to be what I thought I should be. I just had to be me. I could trust my judgments and run with my imagination. I began to identify what energises me. I could say 'yes' to being excited by music, colour, movement, art and the natural world around me.

This discovery has also been a help in my spiritual life because, in approaching God, those same 'yes' factors have come into play. I now find that I am eased into his presence by music, art, movement and his amazing creation. So it is not surprising that I intuitively responded to Rublev's icon, without knowing much about it.

Over the centuries, people have wanted to convey spiritual realities through visual images. Churches, museums, galleries and homes throughout the world display religious works of art. Paintings abound depicting the annunciation, Christ's nativity and baptism, his transfiguration, crucifixion and resurrection, Mary the mother of God, the apostles and the saints.

## Art in the early Church

Portrait painting was popular in the Roman Empire at the time of Christ and there is a belief that an image of Christ himself dated from his own lifetime. Early in the fourth century, Eusebius wrote in his *History of the Church*, 'I have seen a great many portraits of the Saviour, and of Peter and Paul, which have been preserved up to our time.'<sup>1</sup> I wonder what they would have looked like—olive-skinned or fair, bearded

or clean-shaven, strongly built or slight, dark or flaxen hair. We can only speculate.

Recently my husband and I visited Rome, and we were taken to see some of the catacombs. I say ‘some’ because there are many miles of catacombs around Rome. They are underground labyrinths made up of burial chambers tunnelled out of the soft, volcanic tufa rock. Some were Jewish burial sites, some were pagan, but most were Christian. In the first three centuries, Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire and Christians were often brutally persecuted because of their faith. They needed secret places to bury their dead—hence the tunnelling of the catacombs.

Often, when persecution was at its fiercest, Christians would hide in the honeycombed cemeteries beneath the ground, in fear for their lives. They scratched symbols of their faith on the walls, and fragments of their frescoes remain to this day. We could make out three men praising God in the fiery furnace, Noah in the ark, the eucharistic meal, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and Jesus as the good shepherd, carrying a lamb on his shoulders. There were symbols of a fish, a dove and an anchor. In the absence of the written word, these simple drawings became powerful reminders of the God who could meet them in their own suffering, and of Jesus who said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die’ (John 11:25–26). They looked upon the catacombs as resting places, where their dead relatives and friends, many of them martyrs, would await the resurrection.

We were impressed by the fact that it was not enough for those first Christians to write inscriptions; they wanted to

have visual images as well. I suppose this is not surprising, for all around us is a wonderfully visual world, created by God for us to inhabit. We are made in his image and so creativity is part of our nature, too. We express it through art, words, movement and music. It touches the soul, and, when we want to convey feelings, thoughts and worship sparked by a sense of the divine, we use these various expressions. So John wrote his Gospel; Handel composed the sublime 'Hallelujah' chorus in his *Messiah*, Michelangelo sculpted the *Pieta* and Rublev painted his icon of the Holy Trinity.

With its use of icons, the Eastern Orthodox Church has particularly focused on the visual. An icon is not the same as a picture. The word 'icon' comes straight from the Greek *ikon*, which means 'image'. It can be applied to a mosaic, a fresco, a statue or paintings on wood that represent a historical event in scripture or the life of a saint. It is an ancient art and a sacred art. Icons are not intended for decoration or as instruction for the uneducated (as stained-glass windows were in Western churches). They are a gateway to the divine and, as such, they are aids to worship.

Purists would speak of icons as being 'written', not painted, because iconography is not simply a form of art. Rather, to write an icon is to make the word of God present, and it is important that worshippers should learn to 'read' them. However, for the purposes of this book, I shall use the word 'paint', which describes the technique of creating an icon.

## The destruction and revival of iconography

In the eighth and ninth centuries, at the time when Islam was rapidly spreading into areas that had formerly been Christian, there were arguments over icons. Emperor Leo III of Byzantium saw the practice of venerating icons as idolatry. He quoted the commandment, 'Thou shalt make no graven image nor any likeness of any divine thing' (Exodus 20:4). The result was that from around AD726 until 842, there was such a great destruction of icons and religious images (described as 'iconoclasm') that, sadly, little remains from the period before 726. The remote monastery of St Catherine at the foot of Mount Sinai was built in the sixth century, reputedly on the site where Moses saw the burning bush (Exodus 3:2). By the end of the seventh century it was no longer part of the territory of the Byzantine Empire, so the monastery's icons escaped damage during the period of iconoclasm. Consequently, it houses the best collection of early icons, among which is the sixth-century Christ Pantocrator or 'The blessing Christ'.

There was a respite from the iconoclasm between AD787 and 815. The second Council of Nicea was held in 787 and strict guidelines were laid down for the use of icons. A distinction was drawn between the Greek words for 'worship' (*latría*) and 'veneration' (*proskynesis*). Worship belonged to God alone, so icons were not to be worshipped but venerated. Their purpose was to be 'a window opening on to the divine' or 'a door to Paradise'; they would be held in deep respect, honoured for their qualities of holiness and used as aids to worship.

The Council also ruled on the subjects that could be painted in icons. Only God the Son could be directly represented as he became incarnate and was made man. There was to be no direct representation of God the Father or God the Holy Spirit.

One of the most unfortunate chapters in the history of the Church took place around 1054, when the ‘Great Schism’ occurred. It resulted in a break between the churches of the Catholic west and the Orthodox east, to each church’s detriment. There were political factors that led to the split—rivalry between Latin-speaking Rome and Greek-speaking Constantinople, and a disagreement over the authority and supremacy of the Pope. But there was also a doctrinal factor—the controversy over the ‘filioque’ clause in the Nicene creed. Whereas the Eastern church believed in the Holy Spirit as ‘proceeding from the Father’; the Western church altered the phrase to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds ‘from the Father and the Son’ (*filioque* means ‘and from the Son’). This has remained a major theological point of difference between the Catholic and Orthodox churches, although more latterly there have been tentative moves towards reconciliation.

Russia converted to Orthodox Christianity in 988, under the influence of Greeks from Byzantium, who brought their icons with them. For the first 200 years or so, Russian icons were dominated by the Greek style, which can appear severe and rigid in composition. When the Mongol invasion in the 13th century cut Russia off from Byzantium, however, the Russian artists gradually developed their own distinctive style of iconography, which is generally more fluid and curvaceous than the design of icons from elsewhere. Their icons are typified by qualities of tenderness, harmony, peace and the warmth of the Holy Spirit.

The golden age of Russian iconography was in the 14th and 15th centuries, partly due to the rise in monasticism. One of the greatest icon painters of that time was Andrei Rublev. His works can be seen in the Cathedral of the Annunciation in Moscow and in the Dormition Cathedral in Vladimir, but the icon of the Holy Trinity, for which he is most famous, now hangs in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. He painted at a time when Russia was in a state of chaos. There was much civil unrest and division among the people, as well as brutal attacks from the Tatars, fierce nomadic tribes from Mongolia. Russia found itself under Mongol occupation from about 1230 to the middle of the 15th century. For over 300 years, the period of the Renaissance in the West, it was cut off from European culture and inevitably became inward-looking.

The art of iconography continued to flourish in Russia until the reign of Tsar Peter the Great (1672–1725), who favoured imitation of all things Western, whether in architecture, fashion or art. His successors continued with the same attitude, so that, by the middle of the 18th century, there were very few who painted icons in the traditional way.

1917 brought the Bolshevik Revolution and, with it, further persecution of Christians. Once again, icons were destroyed, or sold to foreign markets. Icon painting was prohibited in the Soviet period so painters were forced to work in secret. At the end of the 1980s, however, the prohibition was lifted. Large numbers of icon painting studios have opened and are working in a variety of styles for both the local and the international market. There has been a renaissance in classic iconography, largely due to the uncovering and restoration of many ancient icons. Interest has spread beyond the Orthodox Churches and people from different churches across the world now value icons as a way into silence and prayer. Many

a Russian home has icons hanging on the wall in the *krasny ugol*—the ‘red’ or ‘beautiful’ corner.

## Preparation for icon painting

When iconographers decide on the subject that they want to paint, they do not try to be original. Instead, they will find ancient icons depicting the same subject and follow tradition in their style and composition, though they will not copy slavishly the works of others. Leonid Ouspensky writes, in his book *The Meaning of Icons*:

*Tradition never shackles the creative powers of the iconographer, whose individuality expresses itself in the composition as well as in the colour and line. But the personal here is much more subtle than in the other arts and so often escapes superficial observation... Although icons are sometimes remarkably alike, we never find two absolutely identical icons. Icons are not copied but painted from.*<sup>2</sup>

Therein lies the difference. An iconographer does not set out to reproduce a biblical scene or the image of a saint using dramatic gesture or movement. The faces of those represented rarely express emotions. The icon is silent; there are no open mouths. Rather, the faces suggest qualities such as compassion, love, purity, humility and patience in suffering. The physical pain that Christ must have suffered as he hung on the cross is not shown. Instead, we become aware of his dignity, his sacrificial love and his free offering of himself for the sins of the world.

In Western art, we are used to seeing paintings that make use of perspective, where the lines of a composition lead to a vanishing point. In icon painting, the vanishing point would

seem to be the viewer. Use is made of reverse perspective so that the image comes to meet us, engage us and draw us in. It is almost as if we don't look at the subject of the icon; instead, the image looks at us.

The space and silence of an icon invite contemplative prayer. This is a space that, strangely, is not empty and a silence that is not 'dead air'. It allows for the presence of God and the warm heartbeat of the divine, if we allow ourselves to be still and open before it.

The icon is born out of silence, prayer and devotion, for an iconographer needs to be a person of faith—one who leads a disciplined moral life, not seeking personal glory but the glorification of his or her subject. For this reason the finished icon is not signed and, usually, little is known of the iconographer's identity. This is true in the case of Andrei Rublev. Hardly anything is known about him as a person, only as a painter. Very often, iconographers are monks, as the monastic lifestyle—with its emphasis on stability, poverty, chastity and obedience, linked with love and humility—is conducive to painting spiritual subjects. Also, through his attendance at the church's daily pattern of services, a monk would be familiar with the yearly cycle of festivals and saints' days in the liturgical calendar. Creating an icon is not just about mastering the skills of a craft; it is also about prayer, fasting and meditation. It is to be seen as heavenly work given by God, and a time of disciplined preparation of heart, mind and soul is of the utmost importance.

This idea is captured in a poem by Gillian Allnutt, in which she imagines Andrei Rublev instructing his apprentices in painting an icon of John the Baptist.

*Do not imagine, now, the austere sad face of John.  
Before the snow falls, go to the forest.  
Bring wood for the board. For days, while the stove remains  
unlit in the studio, work the wood with chisel and plane  
until it is smooth.  
Break the ice on the water-butt then.  
Prepare and apply to the board the first thin layer of gypsum  
like a skin. Stretch the canvas. Then put on  
a second layer of gypsum. When it is hard and dry, like bone,  
rub it down until your shoulders are tired.  
Draw the outline of John from the book of tracings,  
the Authorized Version.  
Begin your illumination with the background. Green.  
Bring a bowl of eggs from the monastery farm.  
Let him come loud and clear as a locust in your listening  
to his God, ours. Break the eggs.  
Use only the yolk for the dilution of your colours.  
In the silence of falling snow and the imagination's  
cold dark halls, you'll know your own  
austerity and John's.<sup>3</sup>*

In Jim Forest's book, *Praying with Icons*, he records a typical prayer of an iconographer before he begins his work:

*O heavenly Master, fervent architect of all creation,  
light the gaze of your servant,  
guard his heart and guide his hand,  
so that worthily and with perfection  
he may represent your image,  
for the glory and beauty of your Holy Church.  
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
now and forever and unto ages of ages. Amen.<sup>4</sup>*

This iconographer would then make the sign of the cross, examine his conscience, ask forgiveness for his shortcomings and pardon any who have wronged him. Only then is he ready to begin.

## The technique of iconography

I was discovering a little more about icons—probably only as much as the tip of a big iceberg—but I wanted to know about the techniques for painting them. Here I was helped by Joanna Tulloch, who, with a group of friends, meets for icon painting on a monthly basis. She invited me along to be an observer.

Joanna told me that, in icon painting, earthly materials are used to depict a heavenly subject. The vegetable world offers wood for the panel; oil, amber or other resins for the varnish; and flax for the linen covering. From the animal world comes egg, which is used to bind the pigments; the sable or squirrel hair for the brushes; and size (glue), often made from rabbit skin. The mineral world provides the colour pigments, the gold leaf and the ground alabaster, marble or chalk whiting for the *gesso* (plaster). The remaining ingredient is water.

It seems that most icons are painted in egg tempera on dry, well-seasoned, non-resinous wood such as lime, birch, alder or cypress. The panel chosen for the icon must be free from knots. Preparing the surface of the wood can take up to a week. First it is planed, then routed to create a recess for the painting and, by implication, a frame around it. This allows the hand to rest on the frame and avoid touching the paint while it is being applied. Two horizontal wooden struts of hard wood are inserted into the back of the panel to prevent

warping and cracking. The surface of the panel is finely scored and covered with a liquid size, which is obtained by dissolving the rabbit skin glue in hot water. The panel is then left to dry.

The next step is to glue on a piece of loosely-woven linen. There are two reasons for doing this: it prevents the wood from cracking and it binds the plaster, or *gesso*, to the wood. This is followed by the complex procedure of applying the *gesso*.

To prepare the *gesso*, alabaster, marble or the highest-grade chalk is ground into fine powder, mixed with glue and applied to the linen, keeping the coating as thin as possible. Care has to be taken that there are no air bubbles or other imperfections. There can be between eight and 20 layers of *gesso*. Each application is allowed to dry and is then thoroughly cleaned and smoothed so that there is no surplus of chalk or dust left behind.

When the desired number of layers is complete, the panel is finished off with fine sandpaper or rubbed over with a smooth, flat stone to produce a polished, silky texture. At last it is ready to have the design transferred on to the plaster panel. One way is to lay a paper pattern over the panel and prick along the main outlines using a sharp tool, such as a stylus. The outlines are then scored by joining up the dots so that the surface is indented.

The colours used in iconography are mineral pigments and natural organic colours. I watched Joanna make up the egg tempera. She lightly chipped away at the top of an egg to make a sizeable hole and tipped the contents into her hand, passing them from hand to hand until the egg white had slipped away. The yolk was then gently washed, as was the inside of the shell. She pierced the sac and let the yolk run

back into the shell. A few drops of vinegar were added and the shell was filled up with water. The ingredients were mixed gently but thoroughly before being decanted into a container. The mixture, I was told, would keep for up to ten days in a fridge.

Next, her chosen pigment was ground into an even finer powder on a glass panel, using a glass pestle. A little of the egg mixture was added until it was the right consistency for painting. The paint dries as quickly as watercolour but is not so easily washed off. Its durability and resistance to fading make it a very suitable medium for icon painting.

Iconographers are free to a certain extent to choose their colour combinations and tones, but they are bound to paint the garments worn by the figures in symbolic colours. Blue is linked to divinity and to heaven; green is for youth, freshness, fertility and plant life; red, the colour of blood, stands for life, vitality and beauty; orange-red is used for fire, fervour and spiritual purification; brown is the colour of earth and poverty; purple is associated with splendour, riches and power; white expresses purity, innocence and radiance; gold is associated with sanctity, glory and the divine life of God.

If some areas are to be gilded, such as the background or haloes, this is done before painting on the colours; otherwise the gold would stick to the paints. Applying gold leaf is a skilled and delicate process. First, a special mud-like preparation called *bole*, made from red or yellow ochre, is applied to the icon. The gold leaf is carefully laid over it and burnished with a smooth agate stone.

The colour is painted on in layers, beginning with the darkest and ending with the lightest. Layer upon layer is built up, with the brushes becoming ever finer, and bit by bit the image forms. The process is long and concentrated.

Sometimes translucent layers are applied to give a sense of inner luminescence. Finally, the outlines may be redrawn and bright touches added, using white or liquid gold. The folds of a garment or its embellishments are highlighted for effect.

The name of the icon's subject is inscribed on it for identity and the completed icon is left to dry for a few weeks. It is then covered with a glaze of *olipha* (boiled linseed oil), to which is added amber or other resins. The varnish protects the icon from damp and light, but it also has an effect on the colour, bringing out the rich, warm hues and adding depth and further translucence to the image.

There is a very important last step, once the icon is dry. It is placed on a church altar and the iconographer is the first to pray before the icon, thanking God for the grace given to paint the holy image. The priest and others bless the icon with their prayers and only then can it be given to the church, monastery or home for which it was commissioned.

Learning all this, I became aware of the dedication of the iconographer, firstly to God and then to the image that he or she is depicting. It is indeed a spiritual work that they undertake and they do so with reverence. They will continue in prayer as they work, asking God for his guidance at all points, and they will keep silence. They will work as if they are working in front of God himself and it will be for God's glory, not their own. The icon is born of silence, humility and prayer, and this is manifest in the resulting piece of work. In turn, it leads others into silent worship.

As my respect for the work of iconography grew, an idea took root in my mind and a longing was born in my heart—to travel to Moscow to see Rublev's Trinity icon for myself.

To my amazement, Joanna came up with the same idea and suggested a visit to the Tretyakov Gallery. I readily agreed to her suggestion, although it meant braving a Russian winter.

– For reflection –

*I am impressed by the patience displayed in the preparation for painting an icon. Nothing is hurried. Every stage, from smoothing the surface of the wood panel to varnishing the completed icon, is given its own unhurried time. This is a challenge to my praying. In the busyness of life, I find that it is all too easy to rush into my place of prayer and then rush out again.*

*I ask you, as I ask myself, whether it is possible to set aside an extended time for prayer and meditation. How will we prepare ourselves for it, both in an outward practical way and in the orientation of our hearts and minds?*

*Can we allow ourselves simply to 'be' with God?*

## Be still

*You do not have to look for anything,*

*Just look.*

*You do not have to listen for*

*Specific sounds,*

*Just listen.*

*You do not have to accomplish anything,*

*Just be.*

*And in that looking*

*And the listening*

*And the being,*

*Find*

*Me.*

ANN LEWIN<sup>5</sup>