

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



The East Window

The Holy Trinity: God the Father

Tuesday in the Second Week of Lent

Reading: Mark 9:1-9

And Jesus said to the disciples, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Commentary

For a thousand years, Christian Art did not really illustrate God the Father. This was in obedience to the Second Commandment forbidding such images, and also because, as St John wrote in his Gospel, 'No one has ever seen God.' (1:18)

St John of Damascus in the 8th century wrote at a time when Christians were anxious about the creation of any images. He concluded: "If we

attempt to make an image of the invisible God, this would be sinful indeed. It is impossible to portray one who is without body: invisible, uncircumscribed and without form.” However, he was very supportive of other images, and portrayals of Jesus were allowed, because, after all, He had been seen; He could be visualised.

This view was to be dominant until the 10th century when various representations of God the Father in human form gradually emerged, usually as an old man with a long beard.

This does not mean that God was never represented before this time, only not a full -bodied form. The 3rd century synagogue at Dura-Europos in Syria, has paintings which are the earliest surviving biblical narrative cycle. The ‘Hand of God’ is found several times as an artistic metaphor for the action or approval of God. It became the primary way of depicting God, or the ‘voice of God,’ in Western Art.

In our window, the Hand of God (the ‘Manus Dei’) is seen in a gesture of blessing. Three fingers point down, representing God as Holy Trinity, and two fingers close towards the palm, representing that Christ is God and Man. This same hand gesture of blessing is used by the priest in the sacraments depicted in the panels at the bottom of this window.

Three functions have been distinguished of the ‘Manus Dei’ in Christian art: as symbols of God’s presence; of the voice of God; and as accepting a sacrificial offering.

There are three occasions in the Gospels when the ‘voice of God’ is heard and represented in art by the ‘hand of God’: at the Baptism of Jesus; at the Transfiguration of Christ; and before the Passion in John’s Gospel (12:28). In two of these stories, as here in our window, the Manus Dei signifies God’s presence in Christ, of whom He said, ‘This is my son, my beloved, listen to Him,’ and whose sacrificial offering in His life and Death, has been accepted by God the Father.

Meditation

Place yourself in a quiet place. Relax. Allow all the distractions to go out of your head. Just still yourself. Concentrate on your breathing.

The Scriptures have many verses about the ‘hands of God.’ Meditate on one or two of these:

‘Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, Lord, my faithful God.
‘Psalm 31:5

‘So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.’ Isaiah 41:10

Repeat the words ‘This is my beloved Son, listen to Him,’ over and over in your mind.

What do these words mean? Do you listen to Christ?

Prayer

Holy God, we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ:
may we reflect his life in word and deed,
that all the world may know his power to change and save.
This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen