



IMAGES OF THE DIVINE

December 24, 2016, Christmas Eve

Luke 2: 1-14

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Theme: Christ is the image of God, an image we're called to mirror.

Great God, as you came at night when all was still, so enter our lives this night. Illumine our paths with the light of Christ so that we may see the way to go, the truth to speak, the life to live. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Judaism, and for that matter Islam and some strains of Protestant Christianity, have long been anxious about the making of religious images – pictures, and to be sure statues – to represent the Divine. This caution springs from a rightful aversion to idolatry, the worship of that-which-is-not-God. For Jews and some Protestants, it finds specific basis in a punctilious understanding of the Old Testament's Second Commandment, “*You shall not make for yourself any graven image...*”

But for most of the last 2,000 years, Christians have generally been enthusiastic about creating art that imagines the Divine. Christians have done this even though we know you can never paint a picture or sculpt a figure that captures the invisible and transcendent mystery we name “God.” So why the sharp difference between Christians and other monotheists about religious art? Simply put, Christianity has been more open to religious images simply because we understand Jesus Christ to be, in the words of the New Testament, “*the image of the invisible God.*” “*Image of the invisible God,*” that's the language the Apostle Paul uses to speak of Christ in his Letter to the Colossians. This “image of the invisible God” is of course what Christmas is all about. The doctrine of the Incarnation is the veritably scandalous affirmation that Jesus Christ was somehow Divine Reality enfleshed. And this *theological* affirmation implies an *artistic* affirmation – namely that humanly made



images – pictures and statues – of the visible, tangible human form of Jesus Christ might in turn reflect deep truth about who God is and what God is like.

So with this in mind, yesterday morning I walked down Fifth Avenue to the Metropolitan Museum to search for images of the Divine, specifically artistic representation of Jesus Christ. There are scads of them at the Met. Almost all of them are based on stories about Jesus from the Bible. They're the Bible's words about Jesus Christ translated into visual art representing Jesus Christ. I wandered through the Medieval and Byzantine galleries, the Renaissance and Baroque galleries, all filled with Christian images. There were images of Jesus, of Mary, of the disciples, of John the Baptist, of the Magi – the whole cast of the Gospels plus a few apocryphal hangers-on not actually in the Bible.

There are certain set scenes that I saw over and over – different artists in different eras and different cultures, but the same scenes time and again. I saw images of the crucifixion. I saw a progression of scenes of what must have happened just after the crucifixion – taking Jesus from the cross, the lamentation, the pieta, the entombment. There were images of Jesus's adult life and ministry – Jesus submitting to baptism by John, Jesus healing the sick, Jesus teaching, Jesus taking little children into his arms. And of course, countless images of the baby Jesus – Jesus in the manger, Jesus with the shepherds, Jesus and the Magi, Jesus cradled in Mary's mother's arms. There were innumerable images of baby Jesus – God as a child, God *as a child*.

Of course, no picture, no statue, and for that matter not even the words from Scripture on which those images are based, can contain the Divine Mystery. You can't paint God. You cannot sculpt the Divine. Nevertheless, all those attempts I saw at the Met do offer powerful clues about who God is and what God is like.

As I wandered the Met, taking all of it in, snapping some iPhone photos, I recognized common themes, consistent threads. Over and over, all over the walls and floors of the Met, the art offered four clues about God, four at least:

I saw a God who embodied *vulnerability*, the Divine as vulnerable as an infant.



I saw a God who embodied *compassion*, the Divine taking children in arms and healing the sick.

I saw a God of unbounded *sacrificial love*, the Divine giving his life for the likes of you and me.

And in the strangest and most soul-piercing pictures of all, I saw the *God of life* in all attempts to picture the Resurrection – images of the Divine overpowering sin and death, vanquishing hatred and evil. It's a mystery hard to paint; it's almost never sculpted.

The God of Christian faith, pictured on the walls of the Met's galleries, offers
images consummate *vulnerability*,
images boundless *compassion*,
images of sacrificial *love*,
images of triumphant *life*.

This is not merely a meditation about the nature of God; it's also about us. Deep and old in our faith is the belief that we – you and I – human though we be – are called to somehow grow toward *godliness*. Not to *be* God, please note, but to *reflect* God in our lives. And if this is our moral imperative, the implication of all the Christian art in the Met is staggering. If we are called to grow toward the image of God, it means we are called to grow toward those recurring themes I saw in the art at the Met:

And the four things I saw in those images were
consummate vulnerability,
boundless compassion,
sacrificial love,
and *triumphant life*.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.