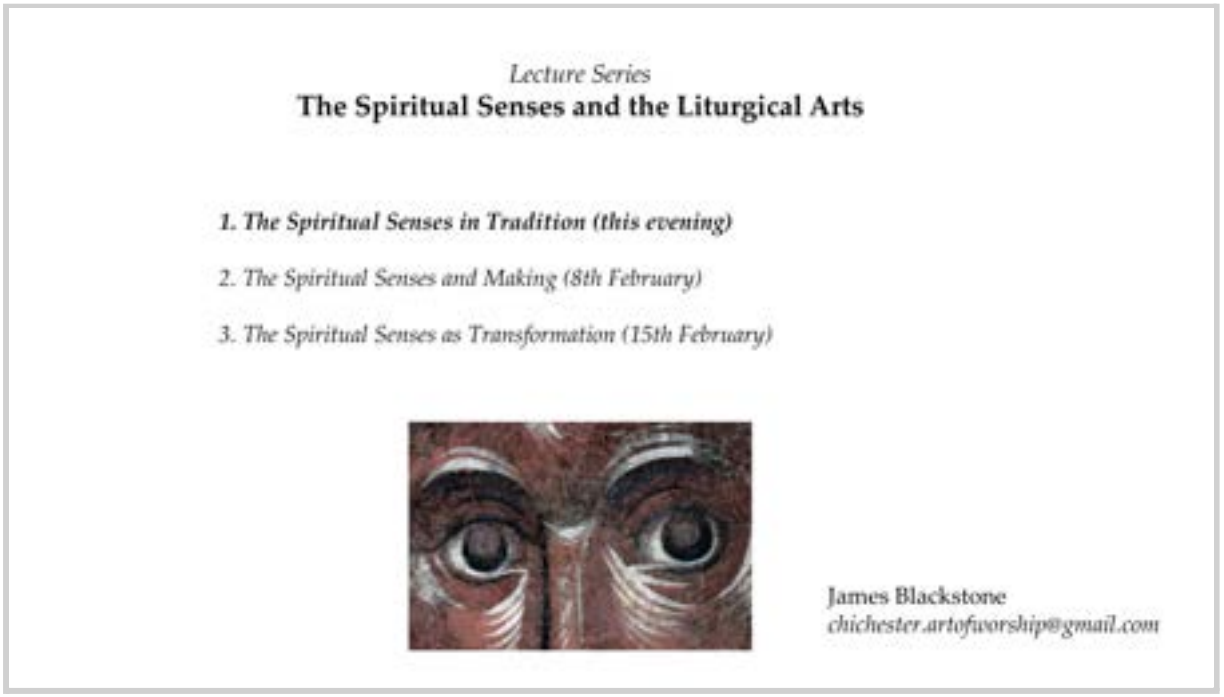
THE SPIRITUAL SENSES AND THE LITURGICAL ARTS

Lecture 1: **The Spiritual Senses in Tradition**
Chichester Cathedral, February 2022

Synopsis
Interest in the spiritual senses is fresh and growing, but the subject is not new. This lecture will explore selected approaches to the spiritual senses taken within Christian tradition. We'll be asking: What are the spiritual senses? How do these spiritual senses relate to our physical senses? What kind of experiences are they? There'll be a focus, within Scripture, on the Song of Songs in particular.



INTRODUCTION

1. Parameters of this lecture

Interest in the spiritual senses, notably in their pre-modern presentation, is growing in Christian circles. Further to readings of the spiritual senses from practitioners of the early centuries, there is now increasing engagement with the sciences and with other religions. I will offer you in what follows something by way of introduction to the area but we might want to develop some of these wider connections in discussion to follow.

2. Title of the series

The series title refers to the spiritual senses and liturgical art, and I don't want to assume that the meaning of 'liturgical art' is clear to all of us. Liturgy is simply public worship, and liturgical art is, as I present it, art that serves the core worship of the gathered Christian community. As an Anglican, I understand the central elements of this worship to consist in the dominical sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist - or illumination and intoxication, as some of the early Christians called them. So we find liturgical art throughout the sacred building, but especially at the font and most especially in the sanctuary around the altar.

There is no requirement to judge all forms of art by liturgical art, as if in a hierarchy. My teacher Aidan Hart speaks, from a Christian perspective, of gallery art, which is as it says; threshold art, which is that art which speaks of faith but without concern for the dynamics of worship; and then liturgical art. These art forms have different roles and contexts according to which they may be distinctly judged.

So that's a very brief summary of liturgical art.

3. Lecture outline

I am ordering this lecture into two parts: the first part argues for the vital role of the body in apprehending the divine; the second focuses on the transformation of the body, and the bodily senses as they apprehend the divine in the context of liturgical art. I want now to set up the whole argument by raising some questions in relation to our Cathedral Church's own liturgical art.

PART ONE: RESURRECTION BODIES

Romanesque reliefs

Chichester Relief.
The Raising of Lazarus.

Second quarter of
12th century.

This remarkable Romanesque relief [above], now in the south wall, was once on a screen between the sanctuary and the north transept, at least according to George Zarnecki whose research on it in the 1950s [below] appears to remain influential.

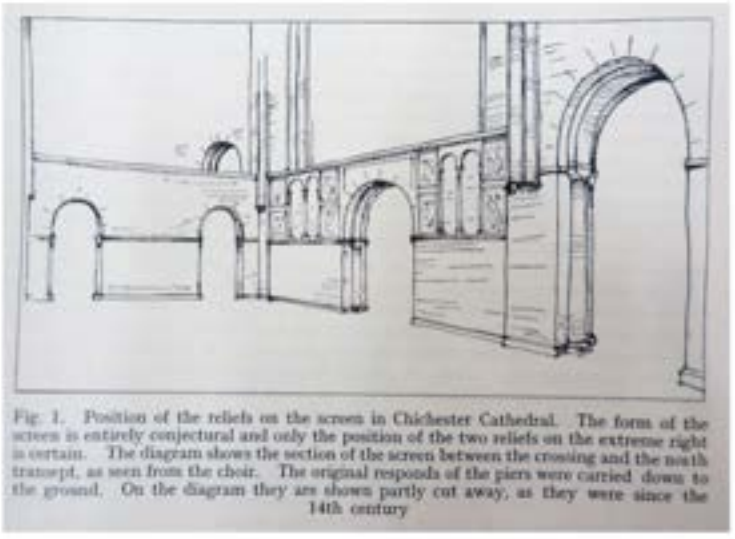


Fig. 1. Position of the reliefs on the screen in Chichester Cathedral. The form of the screen is entirely conjectural and only the position of the two reliefs on the extreme right is certain. The diagram shows the section of the screen between the crossing and the north transept, as seen from the choir. The original responds of the piers were carried down to the ground. On the diagram they are shown partly cut away, as they were since the 14th century

From *The Chichester Reliefs*,
George Zarnecki
(1952).

Here [in the relief] is a depiction of Lazarus, friend of Jesus. He had been dead four days. (John 11.) There was a stench, said Martha, his sister. She wept. Jesus wept. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. He came out of the tomb still bound in part with strips of cloth.

This accounting of life and death and new life is thoroughly embodied. Those who see the resurrected Lazarus see a fully physical being.

Jesus's own resurrection from the dead is different. For, continuing with John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene found no body at all at the empty tomb (John 20). Nor is there any account of a departure of soul from body. The whole man - embodied soul and besouled body (von B, 384) - has gone. Indeed, from the beginning of His earthly life, through His Crucifixion and His resurrection and His Ascension, Jesus Christ is perceived as an embodied figure.

Now the nature of that embodiment changes - at the Transfiguration and particularly after His resurrection - but there is sufficient continuity through to His Ascension to maintain that Jesus is throughout embodied soul, besouled body. He's at least embodied enough to eat fish and bread for breakfast in the company of several of his disciples in His Resurrected condition.

And bodies, crucially, have senses. If physical bodies have physical senses, then resurrected physical bodies have resurrected physical senses. We'll come back to this, after a consideration of how it is that the resurrected body can itself be seen…

Graham Sutherland, Noli Me Tangere

…Not easily, it seems. Christ's resurrected body is not easily recognised.

Graham Sutherland,
Noli Me Tangere (1961)

We come back to Mary Magdalen, here [above] in the Cathedral's Mary Magdalene chapel. She thought the resurrected Jesus to be the gardener. Were it not for Luke's account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we might think that she was simply disoriented by grief as I've heard said in the odd homily. She didn't recognize him til He said her name. On the road to Emmaus, they didn't recognise Him til He broke bread. Thomas didn't accept His reality until, as we earlier saw in Cararvaggio's depiction on Bishop Martin's book, he was invited to place his hand in Jesus' crucifixion wound (John 20).

Note that in His resurrected state, Jesus was still recognised though embodied elements - voice, food, wound. And indeed, his followers are soon to eat his very flesh and drink his very blood to know him (John 6).

I repeatedly emphasize this sensed embodiment mainly so as to ground discussion of the spiritual senses in the Resurrection accounts, which is I think vitally important, but also very challenging. Consideration of how it was that people saw the resurrected Jesus on earth forms a category that contemporary theologian Sarah Coakley has cited from another as belonging, for most, to a 'too-hard basket'. Well, this is our basket for tonight - a 'too-hard basket'.

We look at the Resurrection also because - at the heart of Christian faith and worship - it provides a case for an art that depicts human embodiment.

Now this position on depicting human embodiment has often been open to challenge, and notoriously so in what has become known as the iconoclast period of the eighth and ninth

centuries. Iconoclast means image or icon-breaking, although it was the iconophiles - the image friends, or lovers - who eventually won out. The iconoclasts did not accept that the divine could be depicted. Jesus Christ was fully divine (as well as fully human) and therefore could not be depicted, since beyond sensory categories.

Hagia Irene,
Constantinople / Istanbul

So what the iconoclasts produced included images like this apse cross [above] at Hagia Irene in Constantinople, and I thank my workshop colleague and friend Martin for this reference. Note how skilfully, by the way [below], the mosaic lines are placed across the curved surface of the apse so as to make the cross appear straight-armed.

Some careful observation of another apse mosaic [below], here illustrated helpfully on the Khan Academy website, shows clearly the artistic changes wrought in the period. An original Mary and Christ child was removed by the iconoclasts and replaced with a cross.

Church of the Dormition, Nicaea

Then, with the victory of the iconophiles, the cross was removed and the Virgin and Christ child restored [below] where it remained in place for over a thousand years until the Church was destroyed in 1922.

The arguments of this period were complex, but here's an influential summary statement by Saint John of Damascus which is also written above one of the doors of our current workshop in the north transept: "I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter

who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honour it, but not as God."

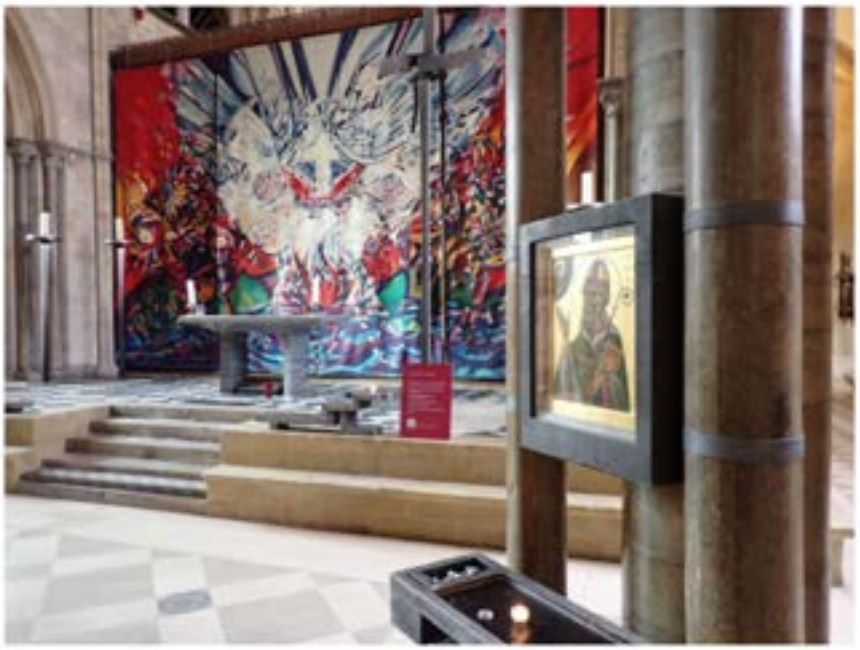
'Who worked out my salvation though matter' he says - resonant with the foregoing discussion of the resurrection body.

And so back to our Cathedral Church.

Anglo-German tapestry at the shrine of St Richard,
designed by the artist Ursula Benker-Schirmer (dedicated 1985)

The beautiful tapestry at the shrine of Saint Richard of Chichester [above and below], shows a central cross amidst a number of other kaleidoscopically rendered symbols, but no human figure.

What then of Christ's flesh and ours, in which Christian salvation is worked out? And what of the integrated figure, the embodied, besouled unity, unfragmented? I ask these questions not to present a personal view, and certainly not a personal distaste to be very sure - the image is beautiful and beautifully made, not least by artists at West Dean College. I ask these questions because I think the Tradition asks these questions, and I think that they at least deserved considered responses. Perhaps we might come back to this in discussion. And by the way, I haven't forgotten the panel icon [below, at right]: and we'll come back to Saint Richard himself in just a moment.



And then to the tapestry at the High Altar, the sacred centre of the Church [below].

John Piper tapestry (installed in 1966)

I have read that the Tau, or T, shape of the cross [below] was chosen for authenticity. And yet, the human figure of history, in whose humanity Christian faith depends, is not there. It would be interesting also to discuss this depiction of the Holy Trinity, though to do so here would depart from the main line of argument.

We are anyway here, it seems, some distance from the embodied Saviour. And the stakes are not simply aesthetic, or perhaps not at all aesthetic: what is at issue here is the way we understand ourselves as embodied beings.

A number of us might want to object that Christian tradition has not consistently maintained the value of the human body, and we might reference instances of the Church's subjugation and abuse of others' bodies: as individuals, as communities, in terms of gender and age and race. This also might be for our broader discussion later.

Now within this general point, and part of the reason for raising it here: I'd like to draw attention to a particular element of the marvellous sculpture of Saint Richard near the west doors [below] - I said I'd return to him soon.

Saint Richard, sculpted by Philip Jackson (2000)

Does he here carry a form of scourge or flagellum for the disciplining of the flesh? [Below. Check audience thoughts: ref. poverty, chastity, obedience.] If so, then here is a form of self-subjugation with regard to the flesh.

Anyway Saint Richard's contemporary, Saint Dominic, used such a practice. Saint Richard trained as a priest among Dominicans in Orleans, and Saint Richard's confessor, Ralph Bocking, was an English Dominican friar. One may suppose that Saint Richard had good knowledge of at least the outward aspects of Saint Dominic's prayer life. We see these aspects in a Bolognese account of Saint Dominic's prayer written and illustrated some forty years after his death in 1221 [below].

De Modo Orandi, c. 1260/88, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Codex Rossianus 3

The scourge here used by Saint Dominic was described as one of iron; a strenuous, and for some of us perhaps even barbaric, discipline [below].

Interesting, though, is the place this illustration has in the set of prayers surrounding it. Saint Dominic sure prayed with his body…

1. Bowing;

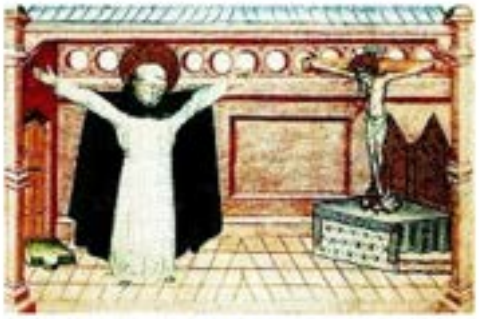
2. throwing himself outstretched upon the ground;

3. as we have seen … ;

4. kneeling, rising, kneeling, rising;

5. standing straight unsupported, not leaning on anything;

6. arms forcibly outstretched, mirroring the cross before which he stands;



7. reaching up and above;

8. reading, often in the night hours;

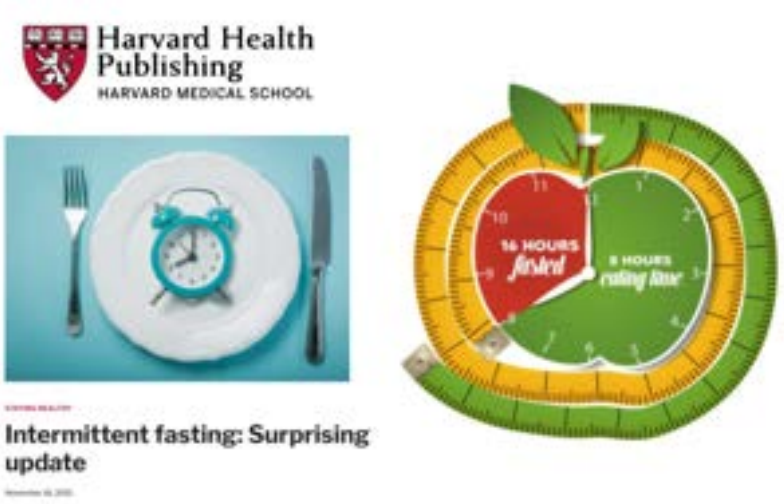
9. withdrawing from the company of the road for silent meditation.

The body undergoes discipline, yet discipline of a varied and creative kind, calling to mind some of the gestures outlined in the psalms as well as those of Christ himself on the mountain apart, in Gethsemane, on the cross. Body responds to body, sense to sense.

So for Saint Dominic, the body was an integral part of his participation in the life of his Lord and, we might infer, of his conception of salvation.

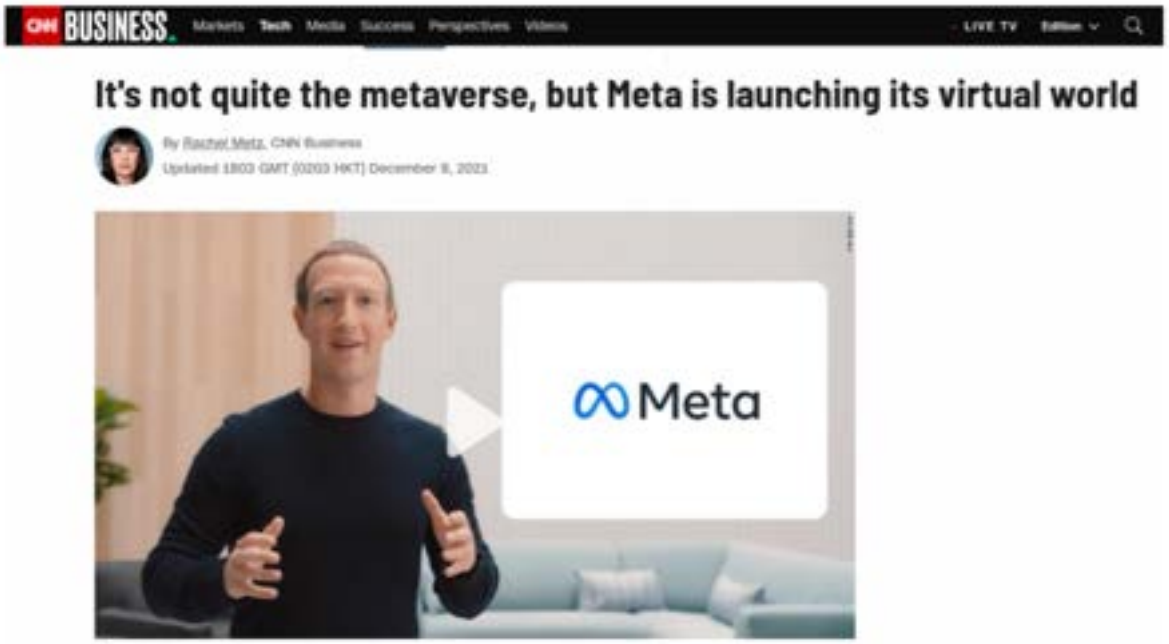
This conclusion gains support when we consider that Dominic spent years of his life preaching in what is now southern France against the teachings of the Cathars, also known as Albigensians. This powerful ascetic group preached a dualism between a perfected world of the spirit on the one hand and the entrapment of the spirit in material conditions on the other hand. Matter, for them, was evil. It has been argued that Dominic's rigorous self-discipline was in part an attempt to gain the favour of a populace in thrall to the ascetic prowess of the Cathari world-deniers rather than having its own intrinsic value. Whether or not that argument is correct, Dominic's physical self-discipline did not signify a rejection of the material world.

Perhaps we can here indulge in a little loose analogy with respect to these points. In our contemporary culture, there is a good deal of asceticism, religious or otherwise.



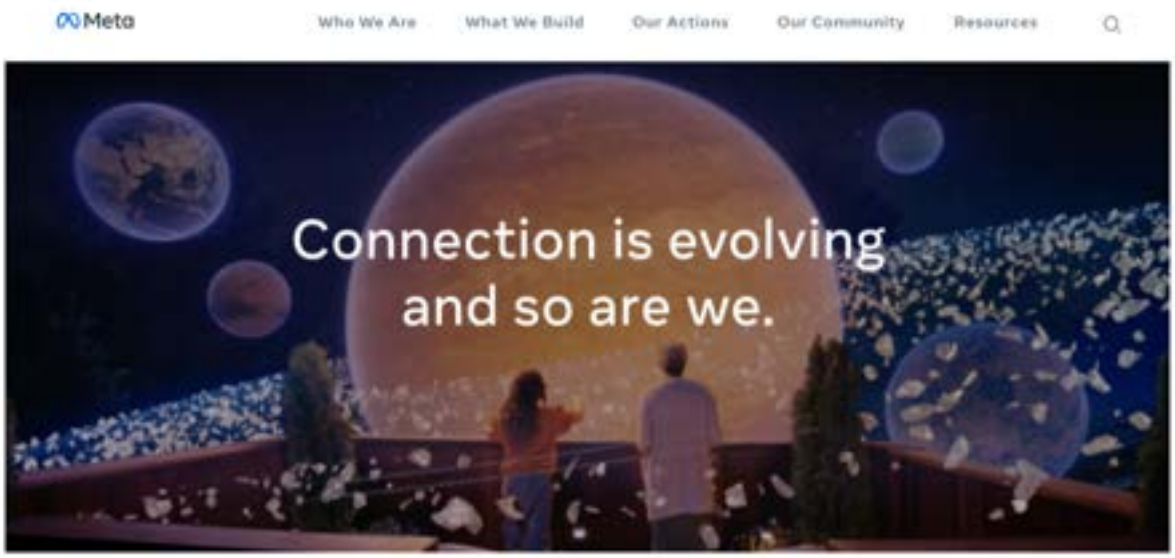
Take, for example, the burgeoning of intermittent fasting, or IF, or the 5:2 diet as popularised in the UK by Michael Mosley - here studied at Harvard [above]. Note that such fasting need not entail a rejection of the body; indeed it's likely to entail just the opposite - an affirmation of the positive value of the body. So there;s an analogy of a loose kind with Dominican, or general Christian, asceticism.

And then we have in our culture too some very high status accorded to the non-material world, dualistically conceived (here somewhat analogous to the gnostic dualism of the Cathars against whom St Dominic preached, even if not as extreme).

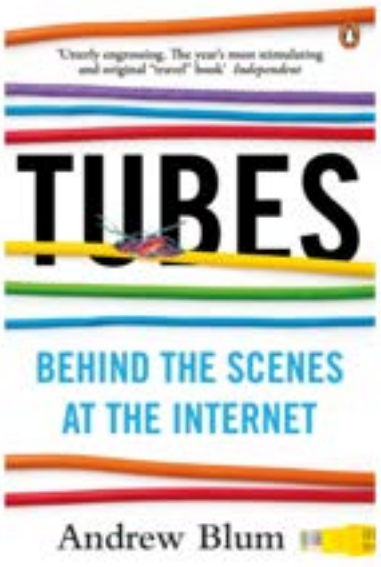


The CNN business correspondent here [above] in December [2021] described Zuckerberg's

proposed Metaverse as a "hard-to-define concept" referring to efforts "to build a wide-ranging virtual realm that people can walk around within, via digital avatars, and interact with others who are also there virtually." Not much flesh there: maybe not precisely anti-material, but hardly affirming of the enfleshed world [below].



Matter in the Metaverse matters, not because it's a meaningfully integral part of the project, but only because it remains necessary in maintaining the virtual world in being. The internet continues to depend on material cables, or tubes [below, left]. The recent volcanic eruption in Tonga made this clear.



The current head of the UK armed forces reminded us of the same, when he pointed a few weeks ago to Russian submarine threats to Atlantic undersea cables.

So, just a couple of analogies to suggest the persistence of somewhat related ideas and practices to those we have engaged with in the times of Saints Dominic and Richard. And this might bring to mind the virtues and limits of online virtual Christian worship, Zoom worship - another theme, perhaps, for discussion later.

With this we come to the end of the first part of the argument that I have wanted to present: an argument for the importance, in the tradition of Christian faith, of the body.

In summary, the body is important because the Word became flesh, because the Word divinised the human body in the Resurrection, made embodiment holy, made it integral to the everlasting being and health of humankind.

The capacity to depict Christ as embodied Word was relatively early on, as we have seen, hotly contested. And the terms of the iconoclast debate, I have at least suggested, remain relevant to the selection and making of liturgical art today.

Finally, the body's importance is not, in principle if not always in practice, negated by the requirements of self-discipline in the life of prayer.

PART TWO: TRANSFORMATION OF THE BODY

For the second part of the lecture, I would like to offer some more consideration of the transformation of the body in the context of liturgical art.

My own approach to the spiritual senses here is pretty much in line with that of the diverse theologians of the early centuries, that is to say, idiosyncratic and unsystematized. I will begin with reference to the scriptural Song of Songs, and go on to present an argument for 'the ruin of painting'. However unsystematic, I do hope you might see some underlying consistency in what follows with what has gone before.

The Song of Songs

in a 14th c. manuscript of the Pentateuch and Five Scrolls, MS 19776, f.117v. British Library

So, to the Song of Songs.

And we start with Origen of Alexandria, a theologian of the second and third centuries. Origen's thought has been undergoing some rehabilitation in recent times, though some elements nearer to Platonic mythology will remain outside the Tradition. Origen proposed that three books in the Hebrew (or old) Testament, when considered in relation to one another, suggest the progression of a person towards the divine. These three books are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Proverbs represents an ethical approach - the value of right action. Ecclesiastes represents a philosophical approach - the value of right thought. The Song of Songs is higher - or deeper - still and represents a theological approach - the ultimate value of love. The Song of Songs, as such, communicates a fulness of divine-human communion. If you're familiar with the Song of Songs, you'll know that this is not how it first sounds. It's love poetry, erotic, beautiful. Origen was quite aware of this, as was a man to follow soon after, Gregory of Nyssa, who took on wholesale Origen's hierarchical assessment of the value of the Song of Songs beyond preparatory ethics and philosophy. For Gregory, the lover who searches with a full heart for her bridegroom, in the desert and in the city, is a type of the person of Christian faith. And what she sees in her heart and comes to know with her body, she fully shares through in union. As Saint Gregory says of the lover (115), "In drawing near to the archetypal Beauty, you too have become beautiful, informed like a mirror by my appearance. For in that it is transformed in accordance with the reflection of its choices, the human person is rightly likened to a mirror". Again he writes (117), "People receive in themselves the likeness of what they gaze upon intently". The lover is transformed by the one whom she loves; her whole being is transformed in accordance with the one whom she loves. Gregory quite surprisingly removes the gender articulation from being a significant element of this theology, at one point saying that whether the divine - here the Bridegroom - is conceived as male or female is neither here nor there. Love is the point, a love that draws ever nearer to the beloved. Indeed for Gregory this is an everlasting movement because the beloved is Christ Himself, who is everlasting, without end. This kind of knowledge of the divine is that of an intimate exchange, a knowledge of life, of presence; it is not about enquiring, at a distance, into the being of the divine and a concern with injunctions (ref. von B.).

Gregory's thinking on the importance of the transformation of physical life even in this life, this earthly life, may well have been stimulated by his grief at the death of his elder siblings, his brother Basil and his sister Macrina - this an argument that Sarah Coakley has made. As Gregory contemplated resurrection in such a context of loss and hope, he thought of resurrection not just as a post-mortem state but as a transformational reality for life on earth. The resurrection of the body, and the senses, is now, in the midst of all, in the midst of grief and hurt.

And this is an insight that liturgical art can, indeed must, offer. But how? Firstly, it depicts lovers. Liturgical art portrays a community of persons being resurrected in love, transformed by the love of Christ - increasingly transformed by that embodied love upon which they gaze intently. Their love is total: it fills their senses, their mind, their will. The whole of their heart, the whole of their soul, the whole of their mind. It is the love of the saints, and the saints are only to be known by their love.

These saints mirror Christ's resurrection love and light in their own transformed bodies. [See the icon of St Richard at Chichester Cathedral's shrine below; see the highlights on his flesh and on his garments.]

Saint Richard of Chichester.
Icon painted by Sergei Fyodorov (2003)

As we in turn look upon their depiction of the saints and their Lord and His Mother in the icons of liturgical art, so we are challenged to enter into that same transformation that the resurrection offers. I want to finish by offering some analysis of how this might happen.

There is a commonplace view of the icon as a window through which there's a kind of *mutual* gaze. On this view, suppose that we are standing before and looking at an icon of Christ; we are here embraced by the gaze of Christ as if He were looking through the icon at us - as if from the other side through a kind of glass sheet, a window. Now an immediate problematic presumption of this view is that of a conventional object-subject relation with respect to the one who sees and the one who is seen. This is problematic because, as we've seen, it's very difficult to know what it means to see the risen Christ - the 'too-hard basket' again.

We can at least say that recognising the risen Christ doesn't belong to the realm of conventional perception. He simply isn't subject to the ordinary modes of seeing. He transcends my ordinary sense perception. The problem of a 'mutual gaze' view of the icon, and the icon as a kind of window, is its tendency to maintain, throughout, the untransformed status of the spectator, as a person who sees with mundane physical and intellectual eyes. It is a view that does not take into account the spiritual, the transformed, senses.

What is instead required is an understanding that the viewer her or himself is elevated, through an inner transformation, to unity with the very thing seen. On this understanding, the spectator of the icon is transformed, "such that the divine light has become visible to eyes that themselves become divine" (Palamas). Here there is not so much an exchange of looks as a taking upon oneself of the gift of the vision of Christ. One here sees as Christ sees, by divine grace. On this understanding, one becomes oneself godlike, beyond all mundane seeing.

Certainly, the material icon is transcended at this point. Indeed, a contemporary writer, Charles Barber, has called it a moment of "contesting the logic of painting", or "escaping the logic of painting" (even the "ruin of painting"): it is a moment when the "beholder becomes subject to the subject of the painting rather than the painting itself", "the moment when they open themselves up to the gift of spiritual seeing."

This is the art of the font and the altar, of illumination and intoxication. Its power is derived from the water and the spirit, from the flesh and the blood of Christ. It is art in service to the transformation of the world in love, emptying itself out before the one who empties himself out, in an eternal spiral of ecstatic love.

oOo

NOTES

Spiritual senses, definition(s)

- Coakley, *Powers and Submissions,* 131: "the transformed epistemic sensibilities of those being progressively reborn in the likeness of the Son".
- Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:424: spiritual senses are not 'other' to the physical senses but are these senses "in so far as they have been formed according to the form of Christ".

Dates

Origen of Alexandria, c.184 – c.253
Saint Gregory of Nyssa c.335-c.395
Saint Dominic 1170-1221
Saint Richard of Chichester 1198-1253
Theophanes the Greek c.1340-c.1410
Romanesque reliefs: second quarter of the 12th century (Zarnecki)