



August 2026: A series on 'praying with' in our year of John.

Praying with Images

I wonder if anyone here places photos of family and friends, as part of their prayer time, and uses the images to help them pray for others? Perhaps also with a candle.

This is one way of praying with images – helping us to recall and focus on the people we wish to pray for.

Or maybe in your prayer corner you place a beautiful image of the natural world, or perhaps, a favourite saint, or a simple cross and candle. These can help us focus – creating a sacred space for us in our homes.

Another way is to use images from the newspaper or other media, especially perhaps situations of despair and conflict, and we can use the images to help us be present with those who are suffering and bring them before God in a way that is more relatable for us.

Even more, we can put the painful images in conversation with an image of Jesus suffering on the cross, or of Mary standing by Jesus as he is taken down from the tomb.

The story of Jesus's passion enables us to empathise with others – as we experience God empathising with the human condition.

We learn from his example, as we learn from St Paul's example, as he encourages us to do: "As for the things you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you".

We learn about the world, and about God, through text and images, and it is natural that text and image can form part of our prayer lives.

Text and image work in different ways, providing different access points to God – if you had a description of your family members you were praying for,

it would have a very different impact on you compared to if you had a photograph of them. Reading from a spiritual text is different from looking at an image of an inspiring Christian figure. Text and image can work together, enabling deeper understanding, and contemplation.

What is important is that we are in conversation and relationship with the Christian story. And that story as St Paul reminds us, encourages us to focus on what is “honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, things worthy of praise”.

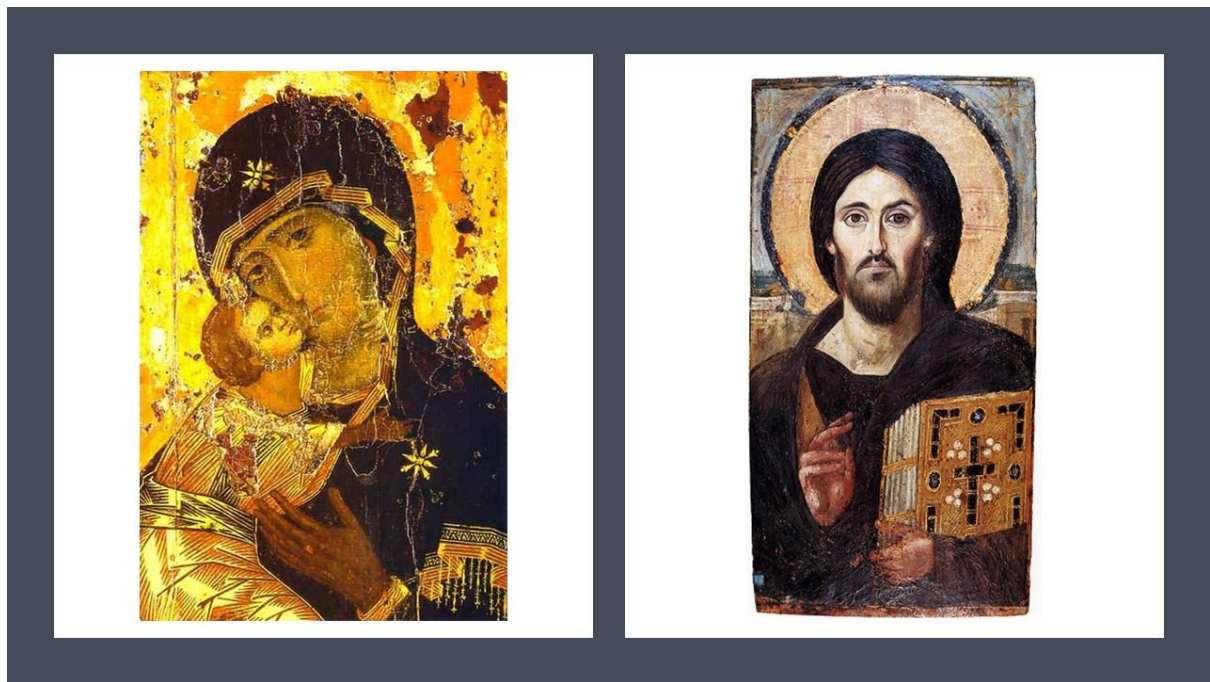
This is a difficult thing to do – so much we encounter is the opposite: our eyes and our attention are so often drawn to what is dishonourable, unjust, impure and so on. To counteract this emphasis, Christian prayer has always encouraged contemplation of God.

Of course, traditionally, when we think of praying with images, we may immediately think of Greek, Russian and other byzantine icons – icon is simply the Greek word for image. Icon painters follow certain techniques that are designed to enable the faithful passing on, of the stories of the Bible, and to focus on the images of the saints are a way of praying, of contemplating the presence of God in certain persons. Most of all contemplation of Christ and of the Mother of God have been emphasised in devotional Christian literature and practice.

The two below are

Left: Icon of Loving Kindness

Right: Christ Pantocrator (Ruler of All)



The Icon of Lovingkindness

This image portrays a suffering Mary; her face is downcast and foreshadows her painful journey as a grieving mother. In the image the Christ child is ministering to his mother, his face turned towards her ready to give her a kiss. This tender image of love and compassion, highlighting not just the paradigmatic bond between a mother and a child, but the divine bond expressed through the incarnation of God's tender love and care for his people. Even as a babe, the Christ-child is a minister of God's grace.

The Icon of Christ the ruler of all

The Christ Pantocrator of Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, painted in encaustic — pigments bound in hot wax, the technique of the Greco-Roman portrait tradition — is generally dated to the 6th century and attributed to a Constantinopolitan workshop, perhaps sent as an imperial gift when Justinian fortified the monastery. Because Sinai lay beyond the reach of the iconoclast emperors after the Arab conquests, its icons escaped the destruction that annihilated almost all early panel painting. The image remained hidden in plain sight for centuries under later overpainting, and only

its cleaning in 1962 revealed the original — instantly recognized as one of the most important works in all of Byzantine art.

From: [Christ Pantocrator: The Byzantine Icon of the Ruler of All](#)

The image shows Jesus as the Ruler of All – with one hand raised in blessing and the other holding the Word of God. Some icons will have a particular text written, such as ‘I am the Light of the World’ from John’s Gospel.

Commentators note the two halves of Jesus’s face – one painted lighter with a sense of peace and glory, the other painted with a dark edge, strained eye and a note of suffering. This has been read as representing the two natures of Christ: Fully divine and fully human. Working together the two natures are what define and characterise Christian understandings of God and his glory.

We have a contemporary icon of Mary and the three hands on the front cover of our service sheet, reproduced below.



This icon, written here by a modern icon writer, Mary Jane Miller shows how icons can change over time. In the original icon it is very obvious that the hand is somebody else's, indeed John of Damascus, see below.



John of Damascus (AD 675) had his hand cut off, because he was a leading proponent of the centrality of icons to worship. A view not held by all religious leaders during his lifetime, caught up in this battle, he was punished for his views. Nonetheless, praying in front of an icon of Mary, his hand was miraculously restored! As the icon was copied the copiers misunderstood and the icon came to look as if Mary had 3 hands. A suitable metaphor for the way in which God can, through grace, add more to our lives and enable us to do more!

Religions in general have a complex relationship to images, neither Judaism or Islam use images in their worship, and therefore this makes Christianity

unique within the group of monotheistic Abrahamic faiths. Fear of idolatry has roamed large in Christian history too. We think of iconoclasm naturally in relation to the Protestant Reformation, but iconoclasm was also prevalent in the 8th century. The 7th ecumenical council in Nicaea was convened as part of the sometimes violent and impassioned debate, and it led to the affirmation of the use of images within Christian churches and by the faithful. This is what the council affirmed:

"We define that the holy icons, whether in colour, mosaic, or some other material, should be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on the walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads, namely the icons of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, that of our Lady the Theotokos, those of the venerable angels and those of all saintly people."

Why might it be that Christianity is able to accept human images of revelation, whilst the other two religions can't? It directly relates to the incarnation:

That since God took on human nature, He became visible and therefore depictable in human form.

To both Judaism and Islam this is heretical. God can be described, but he cannot be named, nor can he be depicted in human form. Islam uses all sorts of beautiful patterns, but not images of humans in their sacred buildings.

The incarnation is at the root of our acceptance of the use of all sorts of specifically human images, across all sorts of media in Christianity. Because Jesus, as the image of the invisible God reveals to us what God is like, in human form.

Whilst we do not have photographs of Jesus, or many of the saints from the past, we do have the stories of their life. And throughout Christian history we have attempted to bring those stories to life through art, drama, statues, architecture, music.

This ability to depict characterises the Christian faith and Biblical stories are ubiquitous across churches around the world, inscribed on to architecture in the form of frescoes and altar frontals, able to teach, to inspire, to inspire veneration and greater knowledge of God.

What we look at and attend to, reflects what is important to us, and what gets our attention, and our time, forms us, moulds us into the people that we are. Today, within our own church tradition we may use images differently from both Orthodox and Catholic Christians, but images remain powerful communicators: they can tell us something more about God.

Look at the two images below of Jesus washing feet.



The one on the left is by Seiger Koder (1925-2015), a German Roman Catholic priest. The one on the right is by Sister Mary Grace Thul OP (1935-2024).

Koder's image shows Christ washing one of the disciples' feet, probably Peter's. The raising of his hand suggests resistance, faithful to the Gospel story. Jesus's face is hidden apart from his reflection in the water; this could have many meanings. As you look at the image, what stands out to you? Note the reference to communion with some bread on the table in the background.

The Sister's image is very different from the other, showing Jesus's face in full, with the light on his face, his hand, and the other person's foot. The absence of any identifying characteristics of the one having his or her foot

washed, invites us to place ourselves into Jesus' hands. We can imagine that Jesus is washing our feet.

When we look at any image that reflects our Christian story, we contemplate habits of:

- Attention
- Patience
- Silence and stillness
- Presence of God

They can be an aid to prayer, and to understanding.

Rev'd Imogen Nay