

Christ the King  
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Images have power to awaken our imagination, to give us vision, and to even instruct us. In “Surprised by Joy,” C.S. Lewis describes a memory of joy, a walk in the country.<sup>1</sup> He talks about how the image or memory of that moment provoked such longing for that moment of joy, and he suggests that the memory and the longing in some way is joy, a taste of heaven. An image has real power to provoke emotions, thoughts, ideas.

I love picture books. As a child, looking at pictures was the reward for looking at a book and learning to read. To this day, if I am reading a book with pictures, I will continuously skip ahead to get a glimpse, a preview of the pictures that are coming. I think Mary Poppins forever burned in my imagination the longing to jump inside of pictures and explore the world beneath the page.

I’m reading a new book filled with pictures. It’s called *Cosmigraphics* by Michael Benson.<sup>2</sup> This sumptuous book is bursting with pictures of our cosmos. Benson offers a record of humanity’s attempt to visualize the cosmos, to picture space across time. He writes, “We create worlds of words and universes of pictures.

Glimpsing through the varied images across Benson’s book is sheer delight: there is one picture that dates back to almost 2,000 years before Christ: it is a disc that visualizes the sun, moon and stars. There are graphs and charts, calendars that intersect with the heavens, people and angels and God ruling over the heavens. And there are globes and circles and dials and all sorts of spheres. I could easily get lost in any one of the pictures.

There is a print of drawing made by William Parson, Lord of Rosse in 1845. In the drawing he attempts to capture an image of the Whirlpool Galaxy that he sees through his giant telescope (which was the largest telescope in the world at the time). What he draws, looks like a burst of light with circles of light streams. We may be familiar with Lord Rosse’s drawing because 44 years later Van Gogh found inspiration in this drawing for his famous painting “Starry Night.”

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Kindle Locations 1897-1899). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Benson. *Cosmigraphics*. Harry N. Abrams; 1 edition (October 14, 2014)

This brings out an interesting point of Benson's book. Images are a language, and scientists, theologians, and artists often communicate their vision of the heavens through pictures. Benson uncovers an interesting print from 1893 where Professor Orlando Ferguson attempts to refute the "globe" theory of the earth. His image suggests that the earth sort of a four-cornered roulette-wheel. For some reason, Professor Ferguson's ideas never quite caught on. But there are several other images that anticipate discoveries made centuries later.

In 1617, Robert Fludd, physician and cosmologist paints a series of pictures about creation. In these pictures, he attempts to show visually how the divine might engage with His created order. Fludd conveys a picture of the solar system that is amazingly similar to our current conception of the solar system. Again and again, early images will often anticipate later discoveries. Contemporary astronomer R. Brent Tully suggests that discovery of the cosmos and visualization of the cosmos often happen simultaneously.

Making pictures is not only a way of communicating, it is a way of thinking. Theologian Jeremy Begbie has suggested that different modes of art like music, language, and images offer different ways of thinking and different tools for discovery and expression.<sup>3</sup> God created us as persons who participate in this creation in a fully embodied way though sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. We can think, respond, and act on multiple levels in words, stories, jokes, paintings, drama, songs, dance, buildings, and much more.

A story might shape the way I view the world, even if I cannot or have never fully articulated that story. Our stories and images can both expand and limit the ways we think. Some patterns can become traps that limit our ability to discover.

Benson quotes physicist Werner Heisenberg, "Contemporary thought is endangered by the picture of nature drawn by science. This danger lies in the fact that the picture is now regarded as an exhaustive account of nature itself so that science forgets that in its study of nature it is studying its own picture."<sup>4</sup>

Let me repeat that last line, "science forgets that in its study of nature it is studying its own picture." All of us are in danger of studying the pictures we create instead

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<sup>3</sup> Begbie has written and spoken in a number of places about theology through art. One good introduction to his ideas in this area can be found in the book "Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts." Baker Academic (October 1, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Benson. *Cosmigraphics*. Abrams: New York, 2014, p. 11.

of the reality around us. I don't simply mean pictures we draw or paint, but ideas, patterns, thoughts, assumptions that can distract us or even blind us from the truth.

For instance, Saul of Tarsus had expectations of the coming kingdom of God based on the the ideas and patterns in his community of Pharisees. When the early disciples of Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God revealed in Christ, Saul opposed them. He could not see the real work of God's kingdom in front of him because the image in his mind trumped the reality before him. On the road to Damascus, the Lord addresses Paul and reveals his blindness. When he encountered the Lord of Glory, his limited images of God and His kingdom has to submit to the reality of the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Eastern Orthodox talk about creating images and breaking images. They speak of the cataphatic and apophatic.<sup>5</sup> Cataphatic knowing is the way of creating images. We do this every single day without even knowing it. This is how we make sense of our world. Cataphatic knowing involves our senses, our ability to think and reason and our ability to imagine. All these work together as we make sense of the world. But then something may happen that makes us question what we know.

From time to time, we will encounter the Lord in a new and fresh way.

This is the apophatic way. This is the realization that our words, our ideas, our icons, our stories cannot contain all truth. Our knowledge is always limited, so we must learn to be open and expectant of new discoveries or new depths to knowing. It can mean the destruction of my images and ideas. Consider our faith in Jesus Christ. I may talk about faith, write about faith, and even seem to understand the depths of faith. But when I behold afresh the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus, my knowledge must give way.

The old hymn reminds us,

“I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene.”<sup>6</sup>

On Christ the King Sunday, we look with expectancy for the day of beholding Christ our Lord in His fullness. We look forward to beholding the One who

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent introduction to apophatic and cataphatic see “Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: The Experience of God, Vol. 1: Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God” by Dumitu Staniloae, Holy Cross Orthodox Press; 1 edition (May 17, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Gabriel (words) and Edwin O. Excell (music). “I Stand Amazed in the Presence.” (Chicago, Illinois: 1905).

supersedes all our knowledge. At the end of his life, St Thomas Aquinas is caught up in a vision of the Lord. He said, "I've seen the Lord. All I've written is dust."

All month long our readings have been apocalyptic passages that point to this great Day when Jesus is fully revealed as Lord, as King, as Judge. In our reading from Ephesians, Paul prays that we might live now in light of the knowledge and hope and glory that will be revealed on the Day of the Lord.

In the midst of a Roman world consumed by power, Paul writes a letter to encourage the Christians in Ephesus and throughout Asia Minor. In his letter he reveals the true source of power, Jesus Christ. He explains how this power is revealed on earth through his chosen vessel: the church. This power takes the form of expressed love that unites those divided by race and class and causes us to serve and care for one another. This self-emptying power appears weak and inconsequential, but it is grounded upon the only true source of reality. All other forms and ideas and powers will fall before the Lord of love.

Today we remind ourselves that Jesus is Lord of history and that His just ways will triumph over the schemes of power in our culture and around our world. Makes me think of an old Pat Terry song,

Christ alone will wear the crown  
Worn by many others  
When will mankind lay it down  
And join our hands as brothers  
Christ alone will wear the crown<sup>7</sup>

Today we rehearse the true and living hope in Jesus Christ our Risen Lord. John Roop reminded us last week that "The day of the Lord is near and hastening, and God longs for it to be a day of salvation, a day of vindication, a day of rejoicing and gladness, a day of exultant singing, a day of love."

We look with expectant hearts for the coming of the Lord. This expectancy continues to shape our reflections as we transition into a new year next week and begin the season of the Advent, the time of waiting and watching.

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<sup>7</sup> Pat Terry. "Christ Alone Will Wear the Crown." (<http://www.elyrics.net/read/p/pat-terry-lyrics/christ-alone-will-wear-the-crown-lyrics.html>)

As we look at the early disciples, we can learn to cultivate this expectancy, this quiet trust in the faithfulness of our God. We can look to Mary whose life is shaped and changed by the word of Gabriel.

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:30-33)

Throughout her life, Mary pondered these things in her heart. She cannot hold or possess this word. So much of her life looks like letting go as the kingdom is revealed in Jesus in ways that she could not have expected. And yet, she is there, quietly present. Even at the cross. In her we see a quiet expectancy that is subjected to suffering and hiddenness and loss.

In this quiet expectancy, we see a watchfulness, a readiness to follow, to obey, to submit.

In Paul, we see this expectancy born out through a man who is called to abandon his status, his power and his understanding as he seeks to follow Christ, to behold Christ, to adore Christ. He will suffer. He will be beaten and left for dead. He will be rejected even by some of the followers of Jesus. He will be misunderstood. Yet he follows with an expectancy, a hope that Christ will be revealed as all in all. His life is both a grasping for Christ and a letting go, and a letting go and a letting go.

If we but pause over the stories of Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Peter, Stephen and other, we behold a people who look with hope toward the word, the call of God, but who also walk through places of death and struggle and loss. And yet, the living hope prevails over the hopeless places where they often live and walk.

Might we all live fully in the light of this living hope. There will be times of doubt and struggle and disappointment, but we turn again and again to the living source of hope in Jesus Christ, asking God to open our hearts and eyes to His glory and beauty and love.

As the disciples walk with faces set toward this living hope in Christ Jesus, the very love of Christ is reflected in their words and actions. They becoming living sacrifices. They become living witnesses to the hope of glory in Christ our Lord.

All across history this living hope of Christ the King has been revealed in weak and frail people who become living witnesses. We are being shaped into living witnesses of the love of God which will heal the world.

In our frailty and in our struggles, we look toward the coming King. As we behold him, we want our fall or incomplete understanding to yield and make way for his unveiling. Like Paul, we want let go of what is behind and press ahead to the surpassing greatness of God's love revealed in Christ. We want our images and ideas and stories to be challenged, to be expanded, to be filled afresh with the light of Christ. May His love be fully unveiled in us and through us to the world. During these coming weeks, may we with disciples of old cling to the hope of glory revealed in Jesus.

Now let us simply pause over the opening words of Paul in Ephesians. I've chosen to read them in the Message simply that we might listen with fresh ears to the great and precious hope of our Lord.

Paul writes,

*“How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He’s the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.*

*Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we’re a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.*

*It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.*

*It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.*

*That's why, when I heard of the solid trust you have in the Master Jesus and your outpouring of love to all the followers of Jesus, I couldn't stop thanking God for you—every time I prayed, I'd think of you and give thanks. But I do more than thank. I ask—ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear; so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!*

*All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.<sup>8</sup>*

*Glory to God in the church!  
Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!  
Glory down all the generations!  
Glory through all millennia!<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Eph 1:3-23.

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, Eph 3:20-21.