

*A sermon delivered by Symeon van Donkelaar to the parish of St. John's Anglican Church in Elora on the twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity.*

This morning I would like to tease out an aspect of today's Gospel reading in a somewhat unusual way, and end by sharing with you a moment from the creation of the icon of St. John the Evangelist which we installed in our church a few months ago. In both the account and the icon, this focus represents something quite small, but through which I hope we can together peer—as maybe through a keyhole—and catch a glimpse of something heavenly.

In today's gospel we hear about a woman who had been very sick for a long time and who by touching Christ's robe is thereby healed. In the traditions of the church this woman was the niece of Herod the Great and was named Veronica. Later in the gospel account she is one of the women of Jerusalem who laments as Christ walks through that city's street with his cross. Afterwards she is thought to have traveled as far as southern France, spreading the good news of the Gospel. Today she is remembered as St. Veronica, and is patroness of laundry workers. But, the aspect I want to explore with you this morning is not Veronica herself, but the means by which she experiences her miraculous healing—I want to look closely with you at Christ's robes.

I think that Christ's robes are an interesting detail to watch throughout the gospel accounts of his life and ministry. When approached in faith by Veronica, they become the means of her healing. This is really something amazing—that a robe made of linen, something that had once been flax awaiting harvest in the field; a robe that was woven together on a loom into cloth and then formed into a garment. That a robe so squarely of the stuff of earth could be effective in working a miracle whispers of something so rooted in our human experience shifting outside of it.

If we keep our eyes fixed on Christ's robes as the gospeler continues his account, it will take us even further—those same robes which were used as a means of divine action for Veronica become participatory in his glory on the mountain of Tabor. As St. Matthew writes in his nineteenth chapter,

“And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.”

As Christ is transfigured into a shining sun, so too his garments became ablaze. Here we have something more amazing than that piece of cloth

being used as a miraculous conduit—our material world is being lit up with the heavenly! In the culture of Christ's time the hem of a rabbi's robe was suspected of having mystical powers—and such human suspicions of earthly object being talismans exist the world over—but in this case this robe of linen is literally participating in the energies of the Divine. That finite bit of cloth is revealing the infinite glory that is God's.

If you've been imagining the events I've described and watching Christ's clothes carefully, there maybe a kind of divine confusion developing before your eyes as the earthly and heavenly blur. Heaven and earth are not two in these texts—but one! To understand this better we need to look to the person wearing the robes; that of Christ. Oftentimes we're quick to appreciate the accomplishments of Christ in his actions during his life on earth. Chief among these would be his death and resurrection, but also his works words of wisdom. But, when we think of his incarnation I think we sometimes tend to get too distracted by the miracles surrounding the events of his birth. Yes, there are angels in dreams and in the air, but the most profound surprise is not those heavenly beings, but the baby in Mary's arms.

I'd like to share with you a few phrases that an Orthodox Christian would use in speaking about Christ's being born. I believe that she would do so

with a special perspective that can help us all. Where we might describe Christ as descending from heaven to earth, she would speak of the earth rising into heaven. She would also talk about Christmas as the eighth day of creation. As the completion by Christ—having formed the world and rested long ago—now joining himself mystically to it and thereby giving unto us what was promised in the Tree of Eternal Life but in a form where it is a profound blessing rather than the curse of eternity in a fallen state. These are beautiful phrases, and worthy of an entire sermon in and of themselves, but affirmed in both is the challenge that with Christ's birth at Christmas he changed the created world itself. God's energies became infused with our physical world. There is no confusion about the glory of God participating within a simple piece of cloth. With Christ's incarnation, matter has become spirit bearing! The stuff of our world has become interwoven with something divine.

It is this understanding of reality that underpins the icon in our church. Any icon is more than a picture, it represents a portal into heaven. Its stylistic considerations inform this aspiration. In creating the icon, I painted it as an image that would witness to us the saint today in heaven. I made his hands and face a little bit larger in order to focus our attention on those parts of any person that most readily engage us. In one hand he offers us a blessing, while both uphold words for us to ponder—"We saw

his Glory; Full of Grace and Truth”. His face, being fully toward us offers to engage with us and is encircled with a halo of pure gold. This beautiful gold brings a special light into our sanctuary (especially in our evensong services, I think) and witnesses the eternal light by way of the same metaphor Christ uses to describe heaven where the streets are paved with gold. Not because it is an expensive or exclusive place, but because it is continually untarnished, as only gold is on earth. His robes are very flat and the perspective of the work (look especially at the gospel) is inconsistent, but it is by this that something eternal is being hinted at. We are invited to see different sides of the same thing all at once; something impossible this side of heaven, but which will be the new reality when time slips away from our lives. So, when we look at the icon, every square inch of it presents to us a theology in colour.

I hope many of you were present when we installed and blessed the icon. It was a beautiful service, and an important one as we asked for God to sanctify this work. But, that blessing didn't represent a completion, rather it was the next step within the life of the icon. Traditionally, an icon is blessed three times. The first is while it is in the care of the iconographer, during the work of its creation. The second is in a service such as we celebrated. But the final blessing is the responsibility of the congregation—

an icon is not fully blessed until it has been prayed with in the church or home.

And by praying with the icon, it takes us even further—offering to us a portal into heaven itself. This is the icon at its most mystical. Just as a robe became participatory in his divine energies at Christ's transfiguration, so too we can hope that this icon will witness Christ and his saints to us. And, just as Christ's hem was used to perform a miracle, so too can an icon heal those who are sick.

In this particular icon we have offered the ecosystem of our community toward this hope. In cutting down a tree in Winterbourne for lumber on a cold January day or in collecting coloured mud from the bank of the Conestoga River for pigment to paint the face of St. John, I have gathered up little bits of our community in order to realize this work. In doing this, I hope that this icon will reveal to us a heavenly vision of our community—the chance to include our local trees, and rocks, and soils in order to experience Christ and his saints through our own local-colours. In a sense, we can all now wait to hear our own rocks cry out! And, in my experience, if we watch and pray with our icon as did Veronica in today's gospel or as did John on Mount Tabour, we too can expect to catch a glimpse of the Divine.

So, cloth is the detail I wanted to share with you this morning. As a material it features prominently throughout both the New and Old Testaments. And let me share with you a detail about the creation of our icon that I have become enamoured with. The first step in preparing the wood onto which I painted St. John was to adhere to it a covering of linen cloth. While this has a practical purpose in ensuring that the work will last, you can imagine that it is also rich with symbolism. Ultimately the aim of this action was to join the work to the many mystical encounters throughout the Bible where cloth has served to reveal God to those who sought him. I hope that this detail will capture your imagination as much as it has mine. With the icon complete, Saint John the Evangelist is now present in a new way within our church—and who better than he who witnessed the heavenly realms in his book of Revelations to offer himself as a portal to heaven.

If I might, I would encourage each of you to find a quiet moment here in our church to come and pray with the icon. Whether you seek as Veronica did, or watch as did John, I hope it will provide you with a special experience in your prayers.