

Icon of the Resurrection

(also known as the “Harrowing of Hell” or Anastasis of Christ)

Unknown artist, Church of Christ in Khora, Istanbul, 1310-1320
(a church where important people had their funeral service)

In Greek, “Ana” means again, and “stasis” means standing = “Standing again” after death.



Lesson Plan

Allow students to comment on an icon of Christ: how is it non-realistic (remember lesson on realism Agony in the Garden). Ask students to identify features which are different eg see notes below

Hand out worksheets. Read out info on icons. Students to answer questions 1-3, then feedback.

In pairs, students complete worksheet, guessing meaning of elements in icon.

Feedback as class.

Plenary/ Homework can be to write a final reflection, as exemplified in past lessons.

Teacher Notes

Although the word "icon" is simply the Greek word for "image", in the Eastern tradition the word connotes a rather special kind of image. Human beings, like you and I, were the first icons. God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." (Genesis 1:26) We humans have darkened the image and likeness of God in our selves through our sin. Only Christ remains as the true of God's likeness. His death on the cross, to forgive our sins, was to restore this image of God in us, so we too can be true icons of God. To be an icon is to be connected to a deep and holy reality.

Photographs and pictures eventually decay and turn to dust. But the events that they represent always exist in an eternal world, especially when these events are from heaven. When we stand in front of an icon which represents Christ, or a saint, or an event from the bible, we are in the presence of this eternal and holy reality. That is why many Christians, especially in the Orthodox Church, treat Icons with great respect. They speak to us about the great truths of our faith.

Icon painters don't use oil paints, and they don't paint people in a natural way – because it isn't considered acceptable to paint holy and spiritual realities in the same way as earthly realities. In an icon, you won't find perspective that gives the illusion of 3D. The whole background is brought forward into a single dimension: everything is present in one plane, in one dimension, in one great "reality". A saint's head seems *large because* you are seeing both the face and the sides of the head brought forward as if on one plane.

Unlike the pictures we have looked at, which all come from the Western artistic tradition,, you will find that Icons always show a particular person or scene in the same way, although small details may vary: there are fixed rules about how to present a holy reality, as the spiritual truth of the story remains forever the same.

The Painting

In the Anastasis we see Jesus, descended into Hell (Sheol). He tramples the gates of 'Hell,' and beneath them lie shattered locks and keys. The devil, or death, lies bound and conquered, a captive. Grabbing them firmly by the wrists, a vigorous Jesus forcefully yanks out Adam & Eve. Adam is the oldest, in the picture. Waiting their turn behind Eve is her son Abel (the 'Protomartyr') with his shepherd's crook, Noah, Abraham and the prophets.

MANDORLA

a symbol of divinity and the joining of heaven and earth. Christ is in the mandorla because he is resurrected into heaven where he lives with the Father, but personally comes down to hell to rescue humanity from eternal death. The golden background is the colour of heaven.

CHRIST

The All-Powerful Christ, very much alive, in mid-stride, lifts the helpless Adam and Eve by the wrist like children. Christ, dressed in a golden garment, raises humanity to a place that is incorruptible and beyond the power of death and degradation.

The body of Christ bears the marks of the nails. It is the crucified and suffering Christ who is now raised in glory. This **suffering for the sake of others** is at the heart of God. That is why in Orthodox churches, the icons of the crucifixion and the resurrection are placed either side of the Blessed Sacrament..

Over Christ's head is HANACTACIC, Anastasis. To the left is IC, short for IECUC, Jesus; to the right, XC,, abbreviation of XRICTOC, Christos.

THE PROPHETS AND KINGS

of the Old Testament in the background, including John the Baptist shows that Christ himself is the ultimate King and Prophet. They seem to be discussing the miraculous event. All are given new life. They are "standing again".

BROKEN LOCKS, SHATTERED GATES, USELESS KEYS

the locks and chains that bind people into the way of death are broken and shattered. Death has no more hold over human beings, even if the devil is still trying to hang on to Adam's foot..

THE CROSS

The cross is carved in the shape of a ladder, indicating that the way to salvation is through the cross. The cross is a weapon that subdues evil. So the foot of the cross is firmly on Satan's neck. The cross is broken, as its power to lead to death and suffering is broken in the resurrection of Christ.

THE DEVIL (or Death)

The devil is bound up himself now, defeated by the power of the cross, which is crushing him. He is powerless to hold Adam and even any longer.

ADAM AND EVE

The first man is representative of all people, leading them into sin. Christ, the second or new Adam, has the power to rescue humankind. Eve appears to be in a secondary position, but this is because her sin was the result of deception, whereas Adam sinned knowingly, which is worse. Her hands are covered as a mark of respect.

REFLECTION

This icon reminds us that Christ can enter into hell, as well as our private hells of fear, of greed, of selfishness and shatter the bonds of that hell: he can take us by the hands, and lift us up to life in Him. As St Paul says: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."