Every major world religion uses images and symbols to express its identity, images that evoke responses both in its own believers and in those who affirm other faiths. In these sermons, we are exploring some of the images included in the Ashmolean’s current exhibition, *Imagining the Divine*, asking how we can find divine epiphanies in our own encounters with these material representations of faith.

The object I have chosen, illustrated in your pew sheet, is the so-called Franks Casket, a whalebone box about 8 ½ inches [22 cm] long, 7 ½ inches [19 cm] wide and 4 ¼ inches [10.9 cm] high, probably made in early eighth-century Northumbria. An English antiquary, Augustus Franks, bought the casket from a Parisian art dealer in 1859 and later gave it to the British Museum; previously it had belonged to a family in a small town in the Auvergne called Auzon. They had used it as a sewing box, until a son of the family
broke the whole thing apart, tearing off its silver fittings in order to buy a ring. That accounts for the gaping hole in the middle of the front panel where the lock once was.

Deliberately enigmatic, this ‘three-dimensional riddle’ [Leslie Webster] presents a number of puzzles to the interpreter, some easier to solve than others. As Ian Wood observed, few surviving objects from this period are so self-consciously clever as the Franks Casket; its designer created it for a highly-educated audience, one knowledgeable about mythology and history as well as Christianity, literate in both Latin and Old English.

The lid and the four sides of the box depict narrative scenes from different sources. The front panel, which you have illustrated and to which I shall return, combines a story from Germanic mythology with an instantly-recognisable biblical scene. A story from Roman history appears on the left end-panel, where the twins Romulus and Remus are suckled by a she-wolf; the back panel depicts the sack of Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Titus. Interpretation of the right-hand end and the lid has proved more difficult, but they probably refer to northern mythologies. Bilingual inscriptions identify the scenes for those able to read the roman and runic scripts.

Let’s look more closely at the interplay between word and image on the front panel starting with the runic inscription, which frames the two different stories depicted in the centre. ‘Fisc flodu ahof’: ‘The fish raised up the seas onto the mountainous cliff (or, the flood cast the fish up onto the cliff); the terror-king became sad when he swam up onto the shingle.’ The final two words, ‘hronæs ban’, whale’s bone, are separate from the rest of the text; they identify the material from which the casket was made as ‘whale bone’, and they also answer the riddle posed the inscription as a whole. The beached fish on the mountainous shore, the terrifying king of the ocean, is a whale. The Anglo-Saxons knew the story of Jonah, of course; those who lived on the coast also knew about whales, which are mentioned by Bede in his description of the island of Britain at the start of his History.

The image on the left depicts a legendary tale of violence and revenge. Weland, a skilled smith, was imprisoned on an island and forced to work for a wicked king. Plotting vengeance, Weland killed the king’s sons and made cups from their skulls. In this image he gives one of those cups, filled with drugged beer, to their sister, Beadohild, whom he will then rape and make pregnant. On the right, Weland’s brother wrings the necks of captured birds and plucks their feathers; Weland will make wings from these to fly away
from his island-prison. Well-known in Anglo-Saxon England this brutal story has nothing to do with Christianity.

Let us turn, perhaps with relief, to the image on the right. Three men, shown in profile, each bearing a gift, approach a seated woman with a child on her knee. Here we are on more familiar ground and have our encounter with the divine: this is the visitation of the Magi, identified by the incised runic inscription reading mægi, just to the left of the rosette-shaped star with thirteen spokes. The first wise man, kneeling, holds out a chalice filled with gold nuggets, behind him the second stoops with a chalice burning incense; the third stands taller, holding a branch denoting myrrh. The arrangement of the figures, descending in height from left to right, draws our eyes to the infant Christ on his mother’s lap. Here is the light come into the world of which St John spoke in our second reading; God’s son sent not to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Mother and child each appear inside a nimbus, a cloud-like halo. The incarnate Christ looks almost as if he is still inside his mother’s womb in an image that stresses Mary’s role as theotokos, God-bearer, mother of God. We might note the contrast between the empty temple on the reverse of the casket (overthrown by Titus’ army, the sanctuary gaping and bare) and Christ enveloped within Mary on the front. The nimbus around Christ makes him resemble a Eucharistic host; the round objects on the ground in front of the Virgin appear to be bread: the living bread that came down from heaven; the bread of life and salvation.

How are we to read the casket as a whole? Do the images together add up to one single, coherent message, or should we interpret them separately, divided up by the physical shape of the casket into self-contained narratives? Does each picture bring us closer to the divine, or is it only after contemplating all the separate stories that we can hope to find a meaning that transcends mundane human existence? We can look for patterns and contrasts: for the distinction between vendetta on the left of the front panel, and gift-giving on the right; between the bad lordship exercised by the king who imprisoned Weland, and the good lordship of Christ; between the son of Weland and Beadohild (conceived through rape), and the son of God, born to a virgin mother; between foundling twins suckled by a wolf, and the Christ child nursed by his human mother; between the temple of Jewish worship and the temple of Christ’s body.
But we can also find synthesis, a deliberate fusing of native Northumbrian traditions with those of Rome, and of Jewish and Christian tradition. Is this casket material evidence of the holding onto aspects of the Anglo-Saxons’ pagan past (even to continuity in pagan ritual and the worship of a pantheon of gods)?

In 797, an English cleric at the Frankish court called Alcuin wrote critically to an English bishop, castigating him for allowing his household to listen to pagan songs during dinner, instead of having sacred readings. What, Alcuin demanded, has Ingeld (a legendary heroic figure) to do with Christ? Had he known of the decorative scheme of this casket, Alcuin might equally have asked: what has Weland to do with Christ?

Other than the suggestion already made – that Weland stands here as Christ’s antithesis – the answer that Alcuin would like us to give is none. But that does not help us make sense of the complex decorative scheme of the Franks Casket as a whole. Nor am I convinced that we should read this as evidence of the failure of the nominally-converted English to abandon their pagan past, with its gods and heroes.

Instead, I think we should contrast the past histories depicted around the casket, the stories from ancient Rome, those of the Jews, and of the pagan forebears of the Anglo-Saxons, with the present- and future-tensed relevance of the Incarnation. That event inaugurated a new promise of salvation for all humanity, pointing towards a future to which the Christian English now found themselves heirs. By including narratives from earlier cultures around the casket, the designer did not merely assimilate into one place the different strands of the Anglo-Saxons’ cultural heritage. He demonstrated in word and image how all those pasts were essential elements of the present that the casket and its viewers now inhabited. All these narratives - the founding of Rome, the fall of Jerusalem, the stories of Weland and of the sorrowing female figure on the lid - contributed materially to the shaping of Anglo-Saxon Christian culture. None could be denied, written out of the story, or forgotten. But in the light of the incarnation, all those pasts acquired a different meaning. One that resonates for us, too.

At the exhibition, as I walked around a replica of the casket displayed in a perspex case, I found myself returning repeatedly to this front panel, my eyes drawn to the Virgin and child. This depiction of the light that has come into the world speaks as directly to us as it did to the casket’s first viewers: this is Emmanuel, God with us, the defenceless infant before whom kings bowed in honour. Yet this is also the God who will be despised and rejected, tortured and hung on a cross; the same God who is the living bread come down
from heaven, whose flesh is the bread given for the life of the world. As we look at the bread cast before his mother on the ground, we cannot but recall our unworthiness even to gather up the crumbs under his table. Yet his promises resonate as powerfully for us as they did for the Anglo-Saxons. We, too, are social constructs, and carry our own historical and cultural baggage, which has served to shape and form who we now are. But the truth of Christ incarnate never changes.