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In the year 1418 a slim devotional volume entitled The Imitation of Christ first came into circulation. Published anonymously, it is traditionally attributed to Thomas a Kempis. The Imitation of Christ is the most famous fruit of the devotio moderna, a revival of the spiritual life that spread across continental Europe from the late fourteenth century. In fact for hundreds of years The Imitation of Christ was the most widely read Christian text after the Bible. Its popularity spread with the rise of printing, and, even into modern times, it was often found next to the Bible as the sole work of theology in a Christian home. Ours is the first century since its appearance in which The Imitation of Christ has not been widely read and known.

Yet even if we do not read Thomas a Kempis’s book now as our forebears would have done, the central concept of the book conveyed in its title is one that almost all Christians would subscribe to. Surely the imitation of Christ is what the Christian life is all about? The acronym WWJD, What Would Jesus Do – made famous by the Christian wristband craze a few years’ back – is the contemporary expression of the book’s ideal. It’s self-evident, isn’t it, that imitating Christ is the essence of the Christian life?

So you might think, but listen to these trenchant words of the great twentieth century Russian Orthodox theologian, Sergius Bulgakov:

In general, the idea of the ‘imitation of Christ’, of walking ‘in His footsteps’, of imitating how He might behave in one circumstance or another, is a fallacious and seductive idea. The Lord summoned us to learn from Him, to be meek and humble in heart, to bear our cross after Him, always to have His image in our hearts, to assimilate His ‘mind’ (Phil. 2:5). But He did not invite us to imitate Him, mentally placing ourselves in His place and Him in ours. He is the perfect Man, the only true Man – ‘Ecce homo!’ (Friend of the Bridegroom, p.159)
Like much of Bulgakov’s writing, these words are intended to shock; they’re part of a wider polemic against what he, from his Orthodox perspective, perceived as the deviations of western Christian practice, Catholic and Protestant alike. So we could simply dismiss the criticism; but the scriptures we have heard today encourage us to pause before we do so. This morning’s readings place side by side on the one hand the life and witness of two prophets - Amos, from the eight century BC and John the Baptist, from the first century AD; and on the other hand, life and witness of Christ. And, in doing so, they help us to see a distinction in the way we, as God’s people should relate to them: the prophets on the one hand; Christ our Lord and God, on the other.

The OT reading gave us the celebrated image of the plumb line from the prophet Amos. As so often in the prophetic books the words of the Lord revealed to the prophets are accompanied by images which embody the message. ‘Amos, what do you see?’, says the Lord. The answer of course is that Amos sees a great deal: injustice, apostasy and transgression. But these departures from the law of the Lord are revealed to him through an everyday object: a plumb-line:

See, I am setting a plumb-line

in the midst of my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by;

the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,

and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,

and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.

The plumb line is at once a measure of rectitude, a yardstick, and a means of sounding the depths. It demonstrates, with mathematical accuracy that cannot be contested, how far askew is the behaviour of God’s people.

And in the gospel we heard of the confusion about the identity of Jesus: Herod Antipas fearing that this Jesus, about whose healing and teaching he hears so much, was John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, risen from the dead; others saying that Jesus was Elijah or one of the prophets of old. The prophets, it seems, provide the only terms available for people to understand Jesus. The confusion is forgivable, but it is misplaced.

John the Baptist stands on the very boundary between the old and the new, the last and greatest of the prophetic line in which Amos stood. As Günther Bornkamm put it, John
is ‘the sentinel at the frontier between the aeons’ (Jesus of Nazareth, 1960). Jesus in Matthew’s gospel describes John thus: ‘Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he’. There is, in other words, no greater human being than John, and the message he brings is one embodied in a life of discipline and self-sacrifice:

And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’

This is a pattern of life to imitate. John, like Amos before him, is a person like us: a person whose goodness we cannot aspire to match, but whom we may at least seek to imitate, against whom we may measure ourselves.

But when we turn to this morning reading from Ephesians with its description of Christ we quickly realise that we are in very different territory: ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places’.

This passage from Ephesians, in common with so much of Paul’s writing, uses this phrase ‘in Christ’ almost to the point of excess:

…[God’s] glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In [Christ] we have redemption…

to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,

In [Christ] you also… were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;

‘In Christ’. The message here is one not of imitation, but of participation; not following but in-dwelling. The gospel and letters of John say the same thing in a different vocabulary when they use the marvellous term best translated by the English verb abide: Christ abiding in the Father; we abiding in him:

Abide in me as I abide in you….Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4, 7)

So the question is not so much ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ as ‘Where is Jesus?’ And the answer is that, as for Saint Benedict in his rule, Jesus is there in anyone who calls at
monastery gate; anyone, in other words, whom we encounter. And he is in us, if he will let him.

F.D. Maurice said that ‘A man is most often right in what he affirms and wrong in what he denies’. Heeding that wisdom, perhaps we should revise Bulgakov’s criticism. We should affirm both our imitation of Christ and our participation in him. But if we do so we should also say that the imitation of Christ comes after: imitation is secondary to participation. Only by abiding in him through his grace may we have any chance of imitating him in his perfect humanity and being united with him in his risen life with God.

Or, as Thomas a Kempis says in the opening chapter of his work: ‘whosoever will fully and with relish understand the words of Christ, must endeavour to conform his life wholly to the life of Christ’. Not just imitation then, but conformity; through abiding ‘in Christ in his life, death and new life for us. Imitation and participation; prophecy and fulfilment; old and new together.

Mercy and truth are met together, •
righteousness and peace have kissed each other;

Truth shall spring up from the earth •
and righteousness look down from heaven.

Amen. So be it.