

Trinity College Cambridge
1 March 2015

FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT
Into the Wilderness

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* and *Head of a Peasant*

Deuteronomy 8: 2–3, 11–16 Matthew 4: 1–6

Canon Nicholas Sagovsky

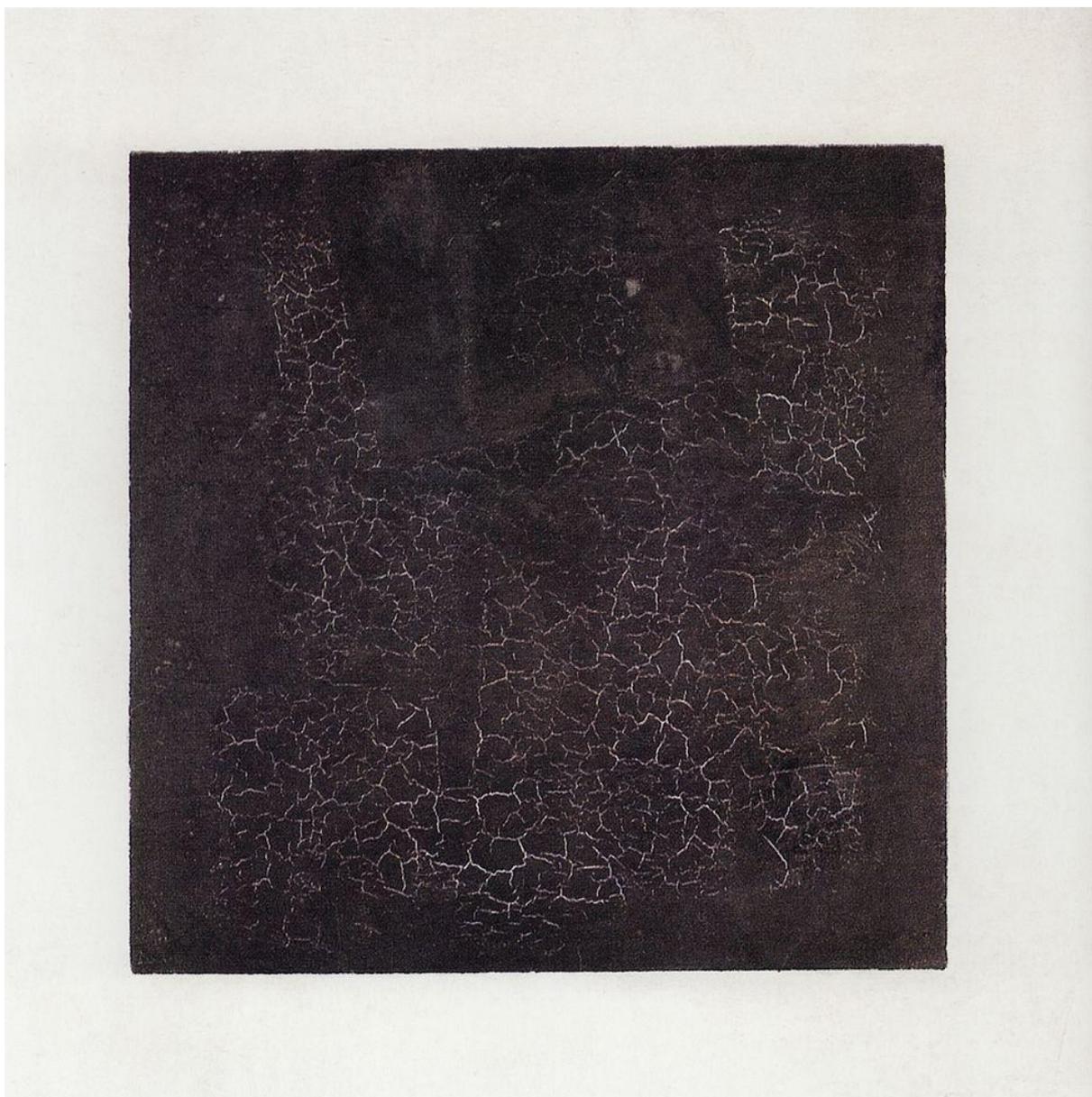
The pictures discussed so far in this sermon series represent some of the greatest works of the East and the West: four superb icons from the East and four great representational paintings from the West. The icons stand within a tradition where the personality of the painter is deliberately suppressed and the religious subject is depicted using a stylised code, which draws upon a familiar language of colour and design. In contrast, each of the paintings chosen from the West expresses the unique approach of a particular painter, communicating the artist's narrative vision by a distinctive use of colour and shape.

The painter I want to discuss tonight, Kasimir Malevich, was deeply familiar with both traditions. Born in Kiev in 1879, moving to central Ukraine at the age of eleven, he grew up in a culture where every house had its icons. When he studied in Moscow, he came to know the Russian nineteenth-century tradition of narrative, representational art, and by his late thirties he had experimented with Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism, all originating in western Europe. In 1915, at the age of 39 – with all the cocksureness of the *avant-garde* – he declared that Futurism was dead and that it was time to draw a line under the great pictorial traditions of both East and West. It was time for a completely new beginning, leaving representation, reason and symbolism behind. Colour, intuition, and abstraction were to reign supreme. Hence the title of 'The last Futurist exhibition, 0.10' (zero may have referred to the new starting point, and ten to the number of artists in the exhibition), which took place in Petrograd in the dark days of December 1915. Far and away the most significant painting in the exhibition was the *Black Square*, which you see illustrated on your service sheet. It was hung high in the corner of the room, the traditional place for a family icon. Writing to the hostile critic Alexandre Benois in 1916, Malevich called it 'the icon of my era'.¹ The first version quickly cracked. Malevich painted the *Black Square* four times, the last version being in 1929.

It would be easy to see the matt black square as an icon of nothing. It is an icon without colour and of the simplest shape. But Malevich made it clear that for him the icon represented a new beginning, pregnant with possibility. 'We are on our way', he wrote to his friend Matiushin, 'to the new Throne of the Wilderness, which is protected by the

¹ The text of the letter to Benois can be found in A.B. Nakov ed., *Malévitch, Écrits* (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1975), pp. 169-73. For the phrase, see p. 171.

guardians of darkness.’² To the critic Benois, he spoke of ‘the bareness of the deserts. ‘There’, he said, ‘is the transfiguration’.³ Malevich’s religious language is always obscure. He was not in any conventional sense a Christian believer, but the darkness was for him the darkness of a new beginning, the precursor to a journey that would lead through a new engagement with colour and shape to paintings of white upon white, where white is the colour of infinity. ‘I have discovered’, he wrote ecstatically, ‘a new world’.⁴



Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), *Black Square* (1915–29), State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

² Quoted by Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square, Malevich and the Origins of Suprematism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 131. Malevich also proclaimed that artist must enter ‘the desert, where nothing is recognisable except sensibility’ (quoted, Tatyana Valinbakhova in G. Cortenove and E. Petrova eds, *Kazimir Malevich et le sacre icone Russe* (Milano: Electa/St Petersburg: State Russian Museum, 2000), p. 120.

³ *Écrits*, p. 171.

⁴ Quoted in the title of Frédéric Valabrègue, *Kazimir Sévérinovich Malévitch, ‘J’ai découvert un monde nouveau’: biographie 1878–1935* (Marseille: Images en manoeuvres, 1994). See p. 96.

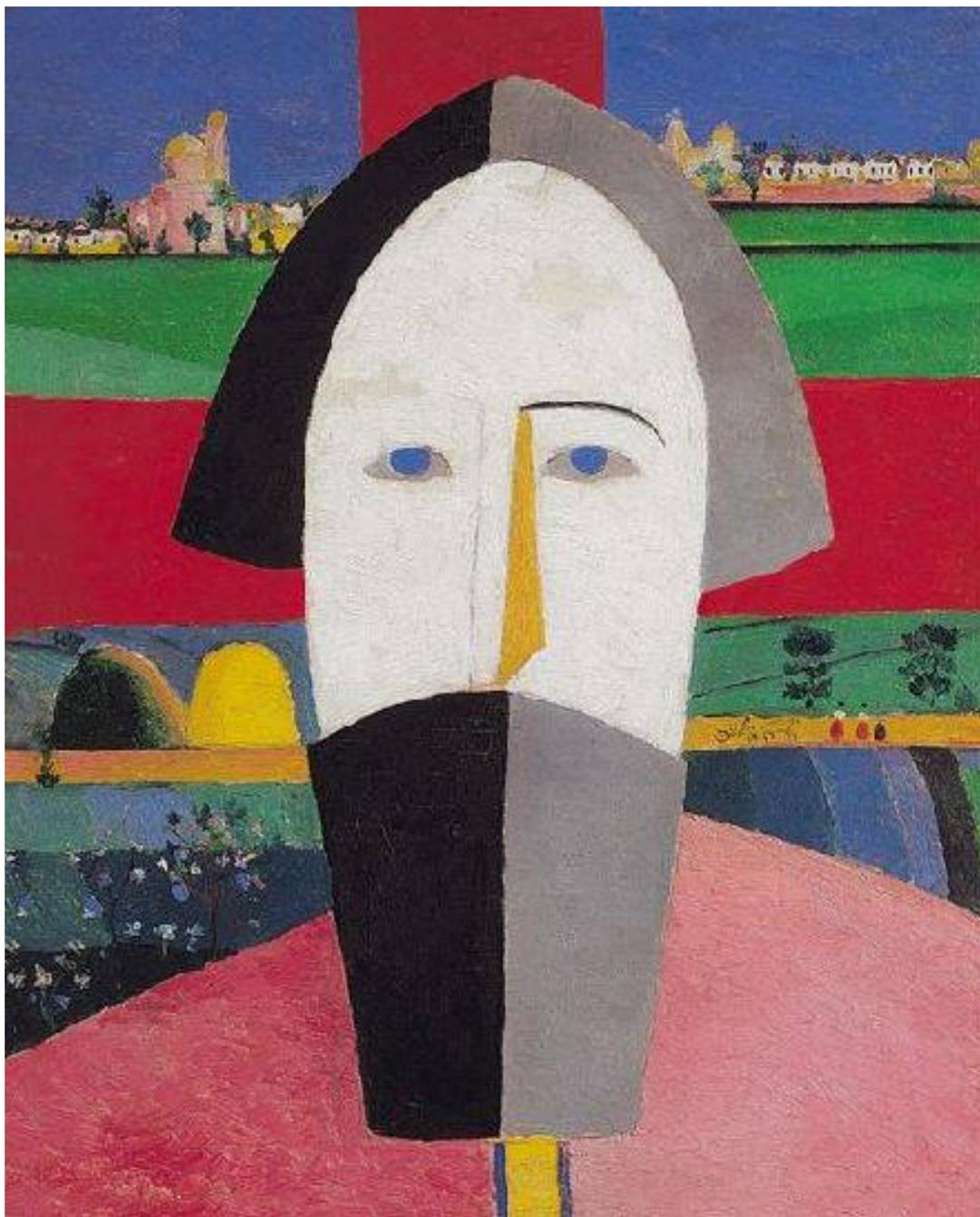
It is not only Malevich's words, but also the historical context which makes the *Black Square* an appropriate icon for a modern journey into the wilderness. In 1915–16, the old regime in Russia was close to collapse. Just over a year later, revolution broke out in Petrograd. What followed was a violent attempt to build a better, more human world driven by the ideology of Bolshevism. Malevich threw himself enthusiastically into this great social experiment, working as a teacher of art befitting a time of such optimism in Vitebsk, within easy reach of Petrograd. At some time in the mid-1920s, however, he gave up painting, devoting himself to architecture, to theoretical writing and teaching. In 1927, he visited Germany, where he lectured and some of his earlier works were exhibited. About then, he began to paint again, but no longer in a style of pure abstraction. In 1930, he was arrested and held for two months whilst accusations that on his trip to Germany he had betrayed the regime were investigated. Malevich was released but from then until his early death in 1935 he lived under a cloud of suspicion and fear. He became increasingly disillusioned and depressed. By this stage, his hopes for an artistic and cultural new world lay in ruins.

When, towards the end of the 1920s, Malevich resumed painting, his interest in shape began to reconnect with the human body. At first, the bodies are highly stylised and faceless, but soon faces begin to emerge. The head of a peasant, which you have on your service sheet, was painted in 1929, the year of his fourth and last Black Square. The peasant looks directly at the viewer, just as Christ does in icons of the Pantocrator (Christ as ruler of all). In the background are vignettes of the countryside, but behind the head is a dominant cross. The colours of the painting are bright like those of a traditional icon. The cross is painted in a rich red. The sky is a deep, heavenly blue. In Russian, the word for peasant is 'Chrestyanin' (a Christian). What Malevich has created, it seems to me, in the early days of Stalinist repression, is an icon of a triumphant peasant-Christ.

Only towards the end of his life, did Malevich come to the position where he could paint this iconic 'Head of a Peasant'. More publicly, he remained identified with the *Black Square*, which became his artistic signature, and was widely adopted as a logo for the Russian *avant-garde*. When he first painted it, he can have known nothing of the terrible famines that would come in the wilderness years under Lenin and Stalin, of the leader-cult, the show trials and the camps of the 1930s, to which he was so nearly sent, or of the survival of popular Orthodoxy despite every attempt on the part of the state to eradicate it. The *Black Square* was painted when the Russian people were poised to go through an appalling forty-year assault on their humanity. At one level, faced with the possibilities and the uncertainties of the future, it draws a line under representational art in any form. It says, 'finis'; time to seek a new starting point. At another, it suggests the primeval darkness which has not yet been transformed by light, by colour and shape. It suggests the possibility that even in the wilderness, with its temptations and terrors, there can be a new beginning.

In all three synoptic gospels, immediately after Jesus is baptized, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The story we heard, as told in Matthew's gospel, is filled with echoes of the Jewish Scriptures. The wilderness was for the Jews a place of purification in obedience to God. In the reading we heard from Deuteronomy, Moses looks back to the way God liberated the Israelites from Egypt, bringing them safely

through the Red Sea, and leading them on, deeper and deeper into the wilderness – as he says, ‘to humble thee and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments or no’. The association of the wilderness with testing helps us understand what is going on in the New Testament when the ‘tempter’ comes to Jesus and says, ‘*If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.*’ Jesus replies by quoting from the passage of Deuteronomy we heard read, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.’ And so, with the second temptation to create a religious sensation by throwing himself from the pinnacle of the temple in the hope that God would miraculously rescue him. And with the third temptation to take control of all the kingdoms of the world – if he would only worship the meretricious Lord who promises to open the path to political glory.



Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), *Peasant's Head* (1928–29), State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

Malevich's *Black Square* represents, in its own way, the artist's refusal to give in to temptations like these. He will not give in to the temptation to add to the tradition of conventional, representational art through which, for hundreds of years, artists have earned their daily bread by fulfilling the commissions of patrons interested chiefly in flattery and pleasure; he will not give in to the temptation to seek personal fame by creating an artistic *tour-de-force* (the *Black Square*, though shocking, was an exercise in simplicity, in impersonality, in self-denial); he will not in his art bow to the ideological demands of the Stalinist regime, which used the threat of the show trial and the prison camp to enforce Soviet realism. The *Black Square* says 'no' to all of these. In place of the rich colour and pleasing shape of the traditional icon, Malevich created a wholly ascetic 'icon of our time' which proclaims the possibility of a modern *via negativa*, a negative way. It is an icon that calls the viewer into the wilderness, into a time filled with the apocalyptic experience of famine, terror, war and the Gulag. Only by entering this darkness, and only after fourteen wilderness years, did Malevich find his way to the affirmation of a new humanity in his brightly-coloured, traditionally shaped and immediately recognisable icon of a rediscovered peasant-Christ.