

All Saints Leamington: the image of Christ in sculpture and tapestry

Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42

It's good to be back at All Saints - you feel in many ways like a sister church to the Cathedral, if I can put it that way, because of your commitment to exploring the way the arts can draw us into the mysterious reality of God. And I know that you have been guided in this by some really outstanding preachers in the last couple of weeks.

We are incredibly fortunate in all our churches to have images that lead us to encounter God in ways that go beyond words. If God is all we believe God to be, mere words cannot begin to do justice to the reality and beauty that belong to him. We are drawn to God precisely because God is not like us. As we look at an image of God, or something which points to God, we are moved within ourselves, taken on a journey of imagination. Journeys of imagination are the proper business of churches - and especially, if I may put it this way, of churches committed to the ministry of reconciliation. That's because in the ministry of reconciliation we are invited to re-imagine a world of relationships which are not broken, shattered by our sinful turning away from God and one another. The old Shaker embroideries of the Peaceable Kingdom do something of this, showing animals and humans living with one another in wonderful harmony, inspiring us to look within ourselves to discover and stimulate the peace portrayed in the image. Some of us literally cannot imagine a world any different to that which we inhabit every day, without some assistance. We cannot imagine a world apart from the dreariness, or conflict, or lack which typifies our own or others' lives. We cannot imagine the Kingdom of God, and so we can't reach for it in our thoughts, in our prayers, in our words and actions.

So, to return to images of God, we want to reach out to God, but it can be hard to know even how to begin. We are taught in scripture that God reaches out to us, and asks us to respond, but how can we respond to that? Or how can we enable and support such a response in our ministry?

God's response to this is to reach out to us in the greatest image of all - that of Christ himself, "the one who is the image of the invisible God". It is in Christ that we can see, know, touch the God who reaches out to us, and it is in responding to Christ that we are able to respond to God. We have one of the most profound examples of this in today's gospel reading, the story of the woman at the well. It's not our task this morning to spend this talk exploring the riches and depths of this passage - but it can remind us of the progression in the revelation of Christ of himself to the Samaritan woman. It goes in stages, each time a little deeper ... starting with Jesus eating out to her, and ending with her reaching out to him. "Sir, give me this water." And then reaching out to her village with the insight of her imagination into who this man is: a world opens up to her, that she immediately wants to share with others. There is a journey involved in this revelation: a journey of imagination; a journey of faith, or belief; and then a physical journey as she goes to the people with whom she lives, and then whom she invites to "Come and see" ... Come and see the man in whom is God's hope for the world.

And if we want to know what an encounter with this Christ means, Paul's passage in Romans can help us - that also leads us on a journey of imagination through his successive phrases, leading us through the challenges of life into a greater awareness of the presence and faithfulness of God, whose ultimate purpose is to reconcile us to himself.

These are the journeys we can be taken on through an encounter with the great art of Coventry Cathedral. Let's start with the Ecce Homo, Jacob Epstein's sculpture in the Ruins. The Ecce Homo was carved by Epstein in 1934, we're told, from a particularly hard piece of marble. It is a difficult piece, and didn't attract a buyer, and ended up "titled by one critic as 'eccy homeless' rather abandoned in Battersea Park. In 1969 it was offered by Epstein's widow to the cathedral, who imaginatively agreed to take it, and today presides rather gloomily over the windowless space. I first really encountered the sculpture when I followed a visiting school group around with their Cathedral guide. After showing them the immediately appealing but arguably rather shallow 'Reconciliation' statue, he managed to get them all in a line with their backs to Ecce

Homo. He explained that in a moment they were to turn round and they would see a statue, and some would like it and some wouldn't - and if they liked it they were to move right, and if not to move left. The group turned, and split, and were invited to talk to each other. I can't recall what they said - but I know how my feelings about the statue have moved since I first saw it, and thought how much I disliked it, and wondered if we could move Christ along, so to speak - or at least clean him up a bit.

I wonder what you see as you look at this picture? I had the image up on my computer as I was writing this address earlier in the week ... I wonder what you see here. The first response is, perhaps, that Jesus is immovable. He's not going anywhere. He's bound, but there is no sense that he is powerless: he could move off that pedestal if he wanted. He has decided to stay, and in his folded hands and impassive expression he forces us to adapt ourselves to him - he is the fixed object, rooted in his own reality, which is rooted in God - and so we are the ones who have to move, shape ourselves around him. We can beat ourselves against him, but he will remain. We can't even easily turn away: there is something eerily compelling about this image. 'Behold the Man' is the text - what should be an image of profound weakness is somehow turned on its head. Here is mystery - God, present and allowing Godself to be bound in front of a human ruler, yet somehow it's all still on his terms. Today, Christ stands in the ruins of a bombed and burned out Cathedral, saying that God is still here - you can't get rid of him with something as paltry as incendiary bombs. He is here, he demonstrates the futile attempt to make him dance to our will: just as Herod in a different scene in Jesus Christ Superstar taunts, 'Prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool', we realise that to say that to this Jesus would just be all wrong!

The huge hands and snub nose make us think of this as a primitive image - a Jesus that comes to us from before before the beginning of time, and allows himself (maybe even causes himself) to be taken, arrested, bound, and consigned to death in time - but will nevertheless triumphantly return at the end of time to claim his Kingdom, and welcome us laughing and dancing into the re-imagined future. But in the meantime he stands - or rather, sits, with us. Implacably, waiting. Waiting for our rage and warring to come to an end. Taking the consequences and waiting for us to return to our true selves, to the hope for which we were created.

Let's move from the ruins into the new Cathedral. As we travel inside, and towards the east end, we turn aside briefly to the head of Christ Crucified by the American artist Helen Jennings, created in 1969 from the wreckage of a car. In an extraordinary sermon about this sculpture by David Kennedy in Durham Cathedral in 2015 (you can find it on Google) he describes how:

When I first saw it, it stopped me in my tracks. I stood still, transfixed, for some minutes; I returned to it time and time again; it led me into silence. For here something was mediated, something that seemed to take me on a journey, that claimed my imagination, that enabled me in some small way to identify with the pain and loss of others.

This sculpture also takes us into the power of the incarnation in a way which goes so far beyond words. The expression on Jesus' face is one of suffering - not so applicable as the *ecce homo*, it embraces the suffering of the world rather than looking on at it. Christ looks at us from behind closed eyelids, as if to say, 'so this is what you do'. I don't find it easy to imagine where in the narrative of the crucifixion the image might sit: Jesus' head is upright, almost alert, not fallen in death. He is not in any way defeated by this suffering which he embodies - he holds it, almost confidently. But there is nonetheless a waiting - for what?

And so finally to the great tapestry - Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph. I have a whole book on this - two, in fact. One, a transcript of an interview with Graham Sutherland, bearing the same name as the tapestry; the other, an extended meditation by Michael Sadgrove, former precentor in Coventry and latterly Dean of Durham before his retirement a couple of years ago. That book, a *Picture of Faith*, describes the journey of gazing and gazing at this amazing image. Sadgrove describes how 'the tapestry makes a traveller out of me'.

The tapestry fills the East End of the Cathedral. Like the ecce homo, Christ is seated - but this time he is not on the cold stone of judgment, but on a throne, although we can hardly see that. It is an image drawn from Revelation Chapter four, the four living creatures from Ezekiel placed around the throne. Of course, there are actually two images of Jesus in the Tapestry - one, almost hidden behind the high altar cross when you stand in the Nave, is of the crucifixion. But rising above this, overwhelming it, is the image of Christ glorified. He looks out at us, and through us, and through the west screen into the world - and into the ruins, where the ecce homo stands. The journey from that sculpture to this tapestry contains all the history of the world.

I'm told that when people look at this image they find comfort. I don't know if that's true for me. I was hugely touched when an American visitor pointed out a few years ago the dual character of Christ's face, holding both death and resurrection - death on his right (left as we look at it), and life on the other side. It's an ancient tradition in icon painting. There's something steady in his gaze - is there a shadow of a smile, rather like the Mona Lisa? Maybe. When I visited Coventry to consider applying for my job I spent a couple of hours thinking and praying and looking, as asking, 'can i live with that?' And eventually I was sure he winked at me!

Sadgrove really helped me to appreciate the threads of the tapestry. 900 colours, we are told -with 300 shades of green. The story of finding somewhere to weave it is fascinating - eventually it was created in Felletin in France, made by 12 women over 2 1/2 years. All those fingers, working and working away, weaving our experiences into this image. It's the size of a tennis court. The creatures gathered around Jesus seem to have no impact on him - he presides. And between his feet we see, again, ourselves ... unaware of the great toes on either side of us as we look out. Christ sees. The eyes are a tiny fraction of the whole, but with their dots of light, they are without a doubt the heart of this extraordinary image: Christ looks at us, and we are left to ask what he sees ... and how that is woven into this image that is held in his gaze.

This is a Christ who can handle anything, even Covi19. And draw us into his reconciled future. This image comes to us from the future - form the end of time in fact, inviting us to find our place before him, along with those incredible living creatures, the tetramorph. Its texture allows a subtlety which the sculptures cannot convey - there is movement here, whereas the sculptures are still, even static. Any moment the creatures could burst into life. breaking free of their web of threads.

But Christ would remain still but very much alive, a presence who holds us, knows us, loves us - and offers us life.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.