CELEBRATING THE NEW NAVE DOOR

THE SERMON OF ASCENSION SUNDAY

*by Fr Richard Fermer on the occasion of the Blessing of the New Sculpture for the Tympanum of the Nave Door in memory of Robert Goldhammer.*

*13th May 2018*

Churches tell stories. Principally they tell the story of Jesus Christ through their worship, appropriating art, architecture and music to that end. In the life of a Christian community that founding story then becomes intertwined with our own. You can see that from the number of people who have left memorial plaques in this Chapel. Their stories have been taken up, quite literally, into Christ’s story through their participation in His community.

Today we celebrate the Ascension of Christ, which marks for now the end of Jesus’ earthly story. The logic of the plotline of the story makes the Ascension not only fitting, but necessary. The plot is simple, we recite it every Sunday: the Eternal Son of the Father is sent to be the light to the world; He becomes a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to reveal that God is love; He is put to death, rises from the dead, and then returns to the Father. If Jesus doesn’t return to His Father, the plot loses its coherence: our humanity does not enter the heart of God, Jesus does not intercede for us, a place will not be prepared for us, and we cannot receive the further Divine Gift of the Holy Spirit.

Today also celebrates the completion of another story: the story of a new nave door. It involves, in part, the story of this community. Remember, we wanted a new nave door to replace the shabby, slightly jerry-built two sets of Edwardian doors, which meant that entering the Chapel was like passing through a dark tunnel. That was not the kind of image we wanted to project to the world outside. Instead, our vision was to create a door, which not only restored the Georgian symmetry and space of the entrance area, but allowed people from the street to see through it into the Chapel and so to offer a taste of the aesthetic and spiritual beauty within: “Taste and see that the Lord is good!”

Yet, there are two other stories involved in this door. First, there is the story of a mother and a son, Jesus and Mary. That story begins in the lunettes of the Chapel in the east screen with the Annunciation, the moment when Mary’s acceptance of God’s promise opens the way for her conception of a child. There is nothing closer than the relationship of a loving mother to the child of her womb. Mary’s and Jesus’ journey together is depicted like a story-board right round the screen and in the Cross above us, ending in Mary’s visiting, with the other women, Jesus’ tomb and finding it empty. That’s where the story ended, until now: the empty tomb.

Now we have taken it to the next chapter, if you like, in the nave door: the meeting of Mary with her Resurrected Son. This is a scene which is extra-biblical, but has been part of the Christian tradition from early times. By no means the first instance was St Ambrose in the fourth century, who saw in the meeting of Mary and her Risen Son, a connection between Mary’s womb and her discovery of the empty tomb: emptiness becomes fruitful, Christ is born and reborn in the Resurrection. The reading from the sixteenth century Spanish mystic and monastic reformer St Teresa of Avila that we have heard, enters the grief of the mourning mother. Mary, you’ll remember, is the one who received both the joyful promise and the prophecies: “a sword will pierce your heart”. She may in some way have been prepared for the loss of her son, but this was never going to inoculate her from the trauma and grief. Yet, the one who so intimately carries the Saviour in her womb and faithfully follows him to the foot of the Cross, will be given the consolation of meeting her Risen Son.

The sculptor of the tympanum bas-relief, Alexander Stoddart, depicts Mary woken from her prayer, reaching out to her Risen Son. Christ reaches out to her, standing over her, with the banner of the Resurrection in His hand. There is a very interesting interplay of the hands. As one who has conducted many Weddings in this Chapel, with the interplay of the hands of the bride and bridegroom in the ceremony, I see how charged that exchange is. The hands in the sculpture are not touching, but there is a great sense of exchange. It as if there is, at one and the same time, both a letting go, and a giving and receiving. Like Mary Magdalene in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ mother cannot hold on to her Son’s physical presence: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20.17b). He has not come to lull her with the illusion that life will continue as before. He has come as St Teresa writes, to restore her joy, the joy she received at the Annunciation. Or as the twelfth century English Cistercian monk Eadmer proclaimed: imagine the “joy of the Virgin when she saw her Son after the Resurrection: for if her joy was so great when He was alive, who can comprehend what it must have been when He arose from the dead?"

So, our new chapter, boldly proclaims the Resurrection at the very door of the Chapel. It says, “Enter my joy, so that your joy may be complete.” This is what the Gospel offers the world: transformation – life over death, love over hatred, joy over sorrow, forgiveness over vengeance and resentment. It proclaims that the Chapel is a meeting place between God and humankind, a place of intimacy and exchange.

Then, finally, there is the story of Gina and Bob. Bob died on a beautiful, sunny late March morning. When I arrived, the room where he lay was flooded with light. Somehow it felt like a scene of the Resurrection. There was not only the light from the sun, there was also the light of the faithfulness of his wife Gina and those who had cared for Bob as they sat in prayerful silence around him. It was a moment like that of the two hands in the sculpture, reaching out, but not touching, a moment of a spiritual exchange: “I have to let go, but I am also given something in the letting go. I can no longer touch, but I move “Into another intensity/For a further union, a deeper communion” (T.S. Eliot).”

Christ’s Resurrection appearance restores joy to the sorrowful. Christ’s Ascension makes space for the next chapter to be written, our empowerment by the Spirit to share Christ’s love and light with the world, and then the second return of Jesus in all His glory so that our joy may be complete and so we may return with Him to the Father. So, people of the Chapel: why do you stand looking up towards Heaven? We cannot remain static. God’s love moves life to its fulfilment. +

*The Chapel expresses its grateful thanks to the patron of the works Gina Goldhammer, members of the Chapel who contributed, the architect Mr. Craig Hamilton and his staff, the sculptor Professor Alexander Stoddart, and Sir James MacMillan whose Motet for the Chapel Choir was first sung on this Sunday.*