

ART IN WORSHIP

The Revd. Margaret Stein

We are all familiar with churches having stained (or painted) windows. We may have visited churches with religious paintings or murals, frescoes or mosaics, and maybe statues. Orthodox churches will also have a selection of icons on display, and they will all have either a cross or a crucifix, symbolic of the central tenet of Christian faith. All of these are designed to help those present to focus on God or learn of some Bible passage, to encourage worship. For many centuries the church was known as *the* patron of the arts.

Between the 1970s and 1990s many congregations had groups who were involved in creating banners, which may have been used sometimes as illustrations for sermons, but more often expressed something of the faith that was meaningful for a particular congregation. Some flower arrangers also played their part in creating displays to illustrate Biblical scenes particularly when there was a Flower Festival, but sometimes for Sunday worship. Also there are some beautifully embroidered pulpit falls often with interesting symbols in their design. These three activities were engaged in usually by lay people, ways in which they could express their faith, and learn to talk about it with each other in the process. But having said all that, I suspect it to be the case that the average Church of Scotland Sunday service only rarely would involve any specific visual art form. I admit to doing so myself on only a handful of occasions.

However, I have had the experience personally of a) spending time studying some particular painting or icon and finding that very helpful and conducive of worship, b) painting something as a result of meditating on a Bible passage, and c) working with a small group of others (not trained artists) expressing, in a drawing or painting, what God has been saying to them during a time of meditation on a Biblical theme, and then sharing their work and thoughts together.

a) Probably the oldest Christian paintings are wall paintings, e.g. those on the walls of the catacombs near Rome, frescoes from before 400AD, some of them Biblical scenes. Then the walls of churches were decorated with frescoes using ground pigments mixed with egg yolk and applied to wet plaster, so that the mixture becomes part of the wall covering. Most often the highest part of the building, like the inside of the dome, would have a depiction of

the Pantocrator, Christ in Majesty, then, beneath, the four Gospel writers and under those, the Apostles, then saints. Mary and other important Biblical figures like Moses and prophets and angels would also feature. All of this was designed not just as decoration, but to encourage worship in an atmosphere which spoke of belonging to the great company of the faithful in heaven and on earth.

There are numerous other frescoes from past ages which can help us in worship. Some obvious ones which come to mind are Michelangelo's marvellous work on the ceiling and wall of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Fra Angelico's Annunciation in a monastery in Florence and, of course, Leonardo's famous Last Supper! We do have a more recently built and decorated church in Edinburgh, once a Catholic Apostolic Church now called the Mansfield Traquair Centre, with wonderful murals of Biblical scenes painted by an Irish artist, Phoebe Anna Traquair (1852 – 1936). Well worth a visit!

But not only paint was used to produce pictures on church walls! Mosaics were also used. Visit Rome and old churches there, and there are many on view. But the most stunning I have experienced is in the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood in St Petersburg, built between 1883 and 1907, where every inch of wall space from floor to ceiling is covered with gloriously colourful tiny little tiles depicting so many Biblical stories. The church with the largest collection of mosaics is St Louis Cathedral in Missouri with more than 41 million tesserae (little tiles) built over 80 years in the 20th century, another place where Biblical stories are depicted to engage people in worship.

As the centuries passed, more often smaller paintings were hung on the walls of churches, one in each of the side chapels of bigger churches, and artists of the Italian Renaissance flourished. Hanging in galleries in Britain are some of El Greco's works like the ones he did of Jesus driving the traders from the Temple, and one of the Garden of Gethsemane, and in our own National Gallery Vermeer's painting of Jesus with Martha and Mary. Not so well known or accessible are the paintings of a modern artist, Sieger Koder, which powerfully present Gospel stories in a fresh way. I understand he painted them to illustrate his sermons! And there are countless others. Time spent meditating on any of these is a way of deepening faith and inducing worship. I once suggested to someone she spend time with Millais' painting of Christ in the House of His Parents. She noticed the lovely little curls of wood shavings on the floor, and rejoiced that God has a sense of fun!

Then, there are icons! The process of writing an icon is a very painstaking one, involving 'a prayer with every brush stroke', careful consideration of the details in the design following age-old traditions from the early Coptic and Orthodox Christian Churches, and specialised techniques e.g. in the use of tempera paint, and of thin sheets of gold leaf which is used to represent heaven. Once the artist has completed the work, the icon is then commissioned to do its work of deepening the faith of the viewer.

One of the most famous is the Russian Rublev icon of the Holy Trinity which depicts the visit of the three visitors who came to Abraham at his home at the trees of Mamre. They are seated at a table awaiting the meal he had ordered for them and are shown relating to each other as the members of the Trinity, but with space left at the front of the table for the viewer to join them. It is one which many have found to be inspiring and the focus of their prayers and meditations for extended periods.

There has been increased interest in iconography in recent years, and courses to help people explore writing icons themselves are flourishing. The Retreat Association is one organisation offering such courses.

To begin to understand what can be gained from meditating on a work of art, I can highly recommend Henri Nouwen's book, *'The Return of the Prodigal Son'* which is about Rembrandt's painting. Rembrandt has wonderful insights into Jesus' parable, and Henri Nouwen's study of the painting brings these out. He travelled to St Petersburg to see it and spent days gazing at it, soaking up its meaning.

An app called Christian Art which daily sends a Gospel Reading and Art Reflection is often inspirational. It is presented by Father Patrick van der Vorst, and has as its mission a desire to offer a passage from the Bible with a related piece of art, presented with a reflection on these, in order that people might be drawn closer to God.

Then there are books which have daily meditations with accompanying illustrations of paintings to help believers delve deeper into the faith and that particularly during the periods of Advent or Lent. Sister Wendy Beckett, a religious sister and art historian has written a number of those, as well as presenting documentaries on television which many have found helpful and interesting. I have a collection of Christmas cards which have works of art, paintings, sculptures and stained glass windows on them, and have used

these with groups to start discussions on what was important for them in the Christmas story.

There are many, many works of art available these days online which could illustrate sermons or be conducive of meditation or prayer and are able to be shown on a screen during a service if so desired. Doing so would benefit those who receive information more easily through sight rather than sound.

b) I have very rarely shown any of my own work as part of a worship service I was leading. However, during the Covid period I did a series of paintings picking up on what was happening during Lent, then Advent, in 2020, on Easter in 2021 and Pentecost in 2022, and have used these in worship services and for display in churches.

The first lockdown came about the beginning of Lent in 2020, and I woke up one morning with a picture of the number 19, with an image of the virus in the circle of the 9, and a pair of lungs between the two uprights. Then the year 2020 in Roman numerals (MMXX) along underneath that. Then images from Biblical stories were introduced, like the stones of the temple, the palm branches, the communion cup and thirty pieces of silver, were introduced. The painting for Advent was similar in construction, with a slightly smaller virus, since by then it was slightly less powerful and there were vaccinations and antibodies on the scene! But central was an angel, and the baby about to be born beside the lamb, John the Baptist's name for Jesus. Mary was symbolised in old Italian masters by a pink rose, so that found its way there, along with holly and ivy, Advent candles and even mistletoe.

The Easter painting was twice the size, with the Temple curtain torn to reveal a scene of Lake Galilee with the hills beyond and the sun rising, and in front a hill with three crosses and another with the empty cave and an angel on top of the stone. In the foreground were the stones of the ruined Temple with six viruses each accompanied by three antibodies, since there were now mutations, but different types of vaccination available. And water flowed out over there as it did from the temple mount.

Finally, the Pentecost picture – another big one! Fiery red with symbols for wind and the still small voice, multiple virus mutations and antibodies, stick figures joining hands in unity, flames above the Roman numerals, and an almost invisible but tactile heart. Because blossom trees were flowering particularly profusely that spring, my laburnum tree featured, with a blackbird

singing as in 'Morning has Broken'. And the war in Ukraine was on all our minds at the time, so blue and yellow flowers with a map of the region found its way into the picture too.

These are now in the safe keeping of the local Library store, able to be borrowed for exhibitions about Covid times. Hopefully they will also be a reminder of the Christian festivals.

c) I began running a 'Wee Art Group' in my home over ten years ago. I modelled it on what took place during a day on a retreat run by the Creative Arts Retreat Movement (now dissolved) i.e. a meditation in the morning, followed by time to paint when the art tutor and the chaplain would interact with each retreatant individually, and then sharing together in the evening.

We chose to meet for a morning, once a month. Because I have six rooms in my home, the number of participants was restricted to that. I shared the leadership with another, who was responsible for the meditation. I provided art materials and ideas on how to use them.

Refreshments were available throughout. We often began with a piece of meditative music, then some input ideas on a Biblical theme, about half-an-hour silently meditating together, then off to different rooms to draw or paint. The other leader and I would visit each one individually for a chat on how it was going for them, then we gathered together again to share our thoughts and artwork. These were times of deep fellowship, often worshipful, insightful, and very meaningful.

The Covid Pandemic might have put paid to this but Zoom came to the rescue, at least in part, and now six are meeting again as they are able, with a second group on Zoom later in the month.

It has often been pointed out that since we are made in the image of God, and God is the Creator, then when we are being creative we are reflecting this aspect of God's being. The corollary would seem to be that whatever we create worshipfully can help others to worship.

Art is a short word, but a great concept, and there are other expressions of it as well as the visual arts. We could speak more broadly about the 'art of leading worship' which reminds us that music and movement, words and silence together make up a unique 'performance art'. The worship leader

crafts it and offers it to God and the congregation so that people can worship without ever stopping to think whether it is 'art'.

Margaret Stein

was born and brought up in Turriff, Aberdeenshire. She studied Drawing and Painting at Edinburgh College of Art, and Theology at New College, and was amongst the first women to be licensed to preach in the Church of Scotland. Having married a minister and had a family, she work-shared with her husband in both parish ministry and running a Conference Centre. She has been influenced by Ignatian Spirituality, and now retired, is a Presbytery chaplain and Spiritual Director, and paints occasionally!