

Breaking Bread With The Dead

(On the See-Through Painting Which Stands in Our Church)

A Talk By Martin Wroe

Can you remember the first time you walked into this building? Maybe it was twenty minutes ago. Maybe twenty years.

The odd thing is that you never see a place again... in the way you see it the first time. Like that first time you move into a new flat or sit in a café that will become a regular.

Walking into this place maybe it was the great wooden slats of the roof that drew your eye – or the absence of pews.

Or maybe it was this bright golden- orange image calling your attention from the far end, up in the chancel. The image that stretches across your service sheet.



It's called a **trptych** – from a Greek word meaning three-fold - and it describes a work of art in three sections and hinged together.

This one, made by the painter Paul Martin has been sitting up there for thirty years.

Triptych's became popular as church altar paintings across Europe in the Middle Ages - either on wooden panels like this one or in stained glass windows.

Window is the illuminating word because triptychs are in the tradition of the *icon* – another Greek word which means ‘image’ or ‘picture’.

Icons are often described as ‘windows into heaven’. See-through paintings in which you see through... to the unseen world.

When this one was commissioned in the 1990's St Luke's was in the process of being reborn as an artistic community, lots of musicians and writers, painters, playwrights, producers and posers...

Things were so fluid that when you turned up on a Sunday morning you never knew which way round you might be facing in a service – east or north or south - and the idea emerged of a mobile altar piece, which could be wheeled into a new position each week.

This was not new.

Until the C16th Reformation, many churches contained portable pictures – but the protestant reformers decided people were worshipping these images instead of God so they got rid of them.

But in another part of the Church – places like Russia or Ukraine for example, but also Ethiopia - paintings always remained important in worship.

This is the Orthodox Christian tradition where an icon is not seen as ‘a work of art’, the product of the imagination - but as a kind of revelation.

Orthodox Christians see the Bible as a verbal image of God's truth and the icon as a visual image.

The painter Paul Martin – who also painted The Restorer:



and Lazarus:



– was influenced by the Orthodox tradition.

He believed art can remind people of the divine presence in life.

So back in the 1990's Meryl Doney, who some of you know, worked with people here on a brief for Paul Martin.

As Saint Luke is known as patron of the arts, the group came up with the snippets of Bible verses which he drew at the bottom of each panel.

Under the left hand panel you can read
Praise the lord upon the timbrel and harp

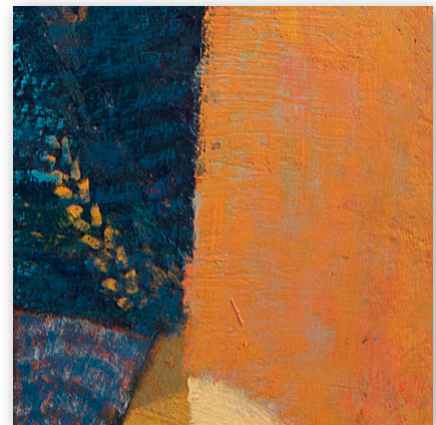
Under the middle panel
In the beginning was the Word

And under the right hand panel
O taste and see that the Lord is good –
this is the line as Justin points out at the top of the service sheet that inspired the composer Vaughan Williams in writing today's opening anthem.

And so the painter set to work, using a centuries-old process mixing beeswax with pigment and putting layer of colour upon layer of colour.

The paintings are set in Heaven after Christ has come again in glory.... and the characters are all saints.

But ordinary saints, the sort of people we might meet each day and, some days, the kind of people we may turn out to be for someone else.



On the left panel the saints are involved in music.

On the right panel in painting.

In the middle panel all the saints face the centre where Christ the Word stoops down to write on the ground – just as he did, explained Paul Martin, when he wrote the universe into being, when he wrote the law on tablets of stone, when he brushed away the sins of someone accused of sin.

Or maybe Christ is not writing but drawing ... just as the divine drew our world into being, made our universe her work of art.

Right in the centre is a small child – who is giving their crown back to Jesus Christ.

The child is wearing trainers, look closely and you'll see they are Converse All Stars, big in the 90's.



The child is us, someone from our time and place and culture, and offering their crown in service to Jesus. What's mine is yours they might be saying.

If it was painted today some of these saints might be tattooed, they might have earbuds on the side of their heads, they might be lost in the shining screen of a smartphone.



Look to the left hand panel and you see a saint carrying bells over his shoulders - this refers to a time when the liturgy of the Church was sung in a series of eight tones.

Behind him, angels are playing shofars – the ram's horn trumpet.

Next to the musician, niftily dodging the bells, is an ecstatic figure, arms aloft, a raver, dancing with joy. This is the penitent thief who only moments before was dying on a cross and then heard Jesus speak to him, *'Today you will be with me in paradise'*.

And now, suddenly, here he is in that paradise – he can't believe his luck. He's mad for it.

Below him, kneeling, another saint offers bread, while behind an angel carries a cup of water – this echoes how we the church bring our gifts of bread and wine, the mystical food and drink offered by Christ for his people.

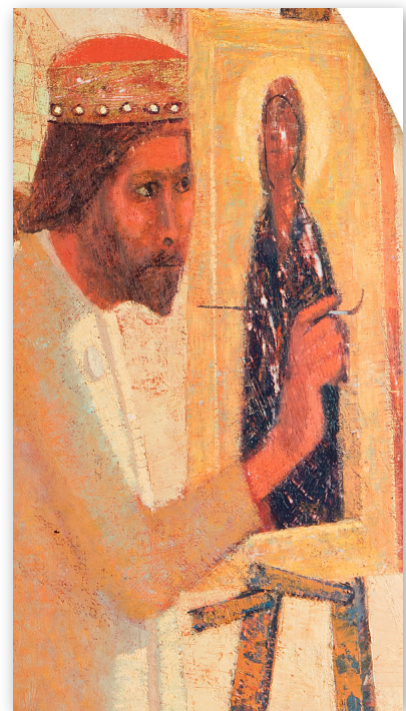
Over on the right panel a painter is at an easel. This is our patron and patron saint of artists, Saint Luke himself.

He's working on a portrait of Mary, the mother of God who is sitting on a throne in a stunning ultramarine blue outfit.

There's a tradition that icons emerged after St Luke painted a picture of Mary and Jesus together... which became the model for the greatest hit of all icon subjects, the Madonna and Child.

But there's another tradition. There's always another tradition.

You can see this one reflected on the left side of the right panel where a saint is covering someone's head with a linen cloth bearing the face of Jesus.



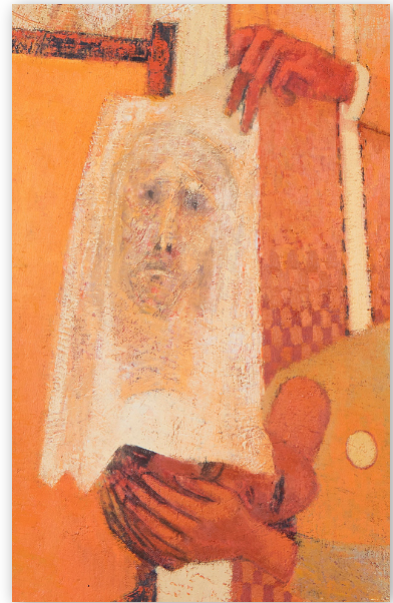
The story goes that King Abgar in Syria, had written to Jesus asking him to visit and heal him of leprosy. But Jesus was already on his way to Jerusalem where he would eventually die.

Instead Jesus washed his face in water which miraculously imprinting a cloth with the image of his face.

This was sent by DHL courier to King Abgar and it became known as 'the icon made without hands' - and started a whole school of icons which showed only the face of Christ.

But in another story the magical cloth refers to St. Veronica who was moved with pity as Jesus carried his cross to Golgotha and gave him her hanky to wipe his forehead.

When he handed it back, the image of His face was impressed upon it.



And here in the centre of this panel, dressed in blue like Jesus, is Mary.



But what is she holding ? (any guesses)

Strange as it may seem, it's her knitting.

It's a ball of wool.

This refers to the fact that God's Son was made – that is 'knit together' - in Mary's womb.

And finally on the far left of this panel is an empty throne.

This seat is 'reserved'.

That's because there is a seat in Paradise where your loved ones will sit when they leave this life.

And you and me, there is an empty seat with God and the saints for us too.

One of the themes of Orthodox imagery is how the living and the dead are actually present together - even though we who are alive no longer see the dead with our eyes.

So the cast of this triptych are what the Bible calls the 'great cloud of witnesses' - the faithful from past, from the present, from the future, standing before Christ and his angels.

It is an icon of hope.



Many years ago Meg and I were in El Salvador in Central America at a time of the US-backed war. There had been a bomb attack and ten people were dead.

We went to the funeral – in fact it was more of a protest, but not just a protest against the war but a protest against death itself.

Slowly the names of the persons who had been killed were read out – and after each name, as one, the crowd of people shouted unanimously ‘Presente’.

It was a loud and defiant affirmation, all the louder for being amplified by the saints in heaven who joined in.

Each person who had died, who had been separated from their loved ones in this life, was still with us all – in some way which only the poetry of faith and hope and love can explain.

This painting says the same thing – it gathers the living with the dead, it gathers all of us into the presence of Jesus.

The poet W H Auden said that if we give art our full attention, it can remind us of the transcendent, it can enable us to ‘break bread with the dead’.

And the poem we heard earlier, All Bread by Margaret Atwood, might be saying something similar - that everything is indivisible.

That the bread we eat comes from the earth which is the place where all life, all of us, go in death.

All to dust return as the scriptures put it... while reminding us also that we were made from the dust of the same earth.

The mystics in religion have long seen how the ordinary things are alive with the divine presence.

‘It is all that is made’ said Julian of Norwich, as a hazelnut rested in the palm of her hand.

When I had a significant birthday last year our son Evan the nature loving climate activist and scientist in our family wrote me a short story... in which someone we know is dead but also alive, in which they move through the undergrowth of a strange new life and sense how their roots and branches are part of a forest of mutual flourishing.

In which they are held and continue to hold others.

‘All bread,’ writes the poet Margaret Atwood, ‘must be broken so that it can be shared...’

That’s not so far from the broken bread and wine outpoured in the poem we enter each week during this service.

Life is sometimes broken and buried... but not for ever.

Maybe you sense a brokenness in your life at the moment.

During our prayers Rhi brings us a chance to bring this brokenness into the light of healing and hope... as does this great golden icon that we can easily overlook.

Take some time with it when you are in this place.

Gaze on it. Touch it. Wonder at it.

After we take the bread and wine this morning, or when you’re lighting a candle or after the service, take a moment for a closer look.

It’s a window.

See if you can see through it.

