

Abstract and figurative?

New stained glass window at Holy Trinity Church Rothwell, Northamptonshire

by Dr Juliette MacDonald, Edinburgh College of Art

- 1> The star of the Holy Spirit glows from the hand of Christ
- 2> East Window – South Nave Aisle (2.5m x 4.6m) 2007
- 3> Seated boy
- 4> Angel
- 5> Spring – One of Four windows depicting the Seasons and Elements, Stowmarket Parish Church, Suffolk

Jesus and the children as described in Mark (10: 13-15) is the basis for Helen Whittaker's recent window for Holy Trinity Church which takes the moment when the children attempt to approach Jesus and are rebuked by his disciples as its narrative content. Jesus' response:

'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it' is central to understanding the imagery contained within the work.

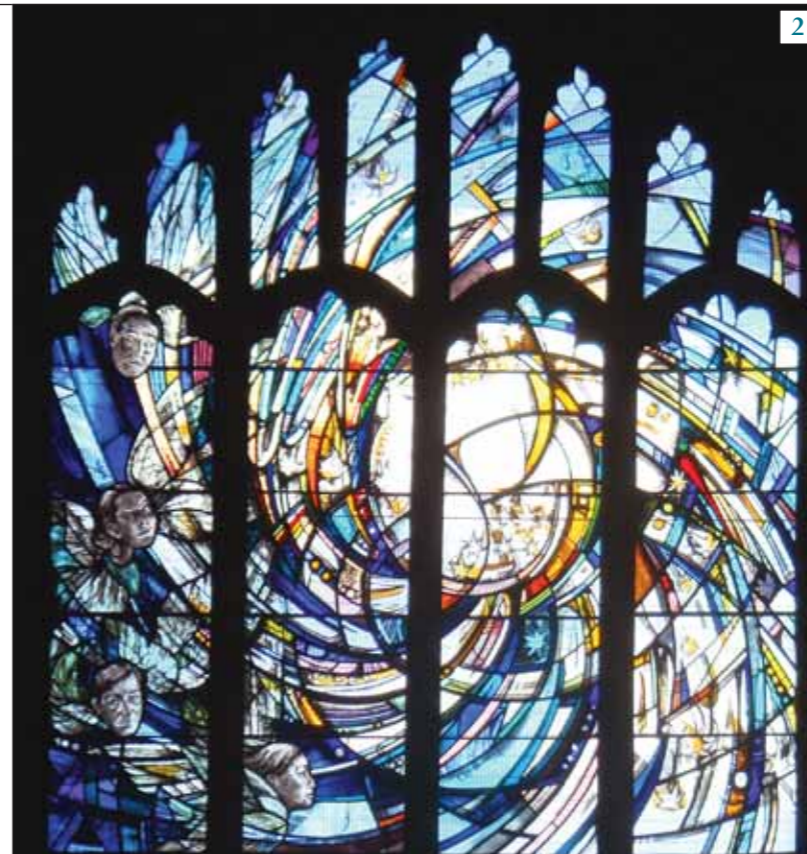
The first figure encountered in the bottom corner of the first light is a young boy cross-legged, head bent in prayer, in the second light stands a group of three children and Jesus stands in the third light, right hand raised in benediction welcoming the youngsters. Behind him, sweeping up through the upper right, central lights and tracery is a vortex of light, whilst Angels hover in the first left upper light, overseeing Jesus' response, illuminated by the orb.

As with previous windows by Whittaker there are more layers of meaning at work. The seated boy indicates that whatever darkness he may perceive around him, he always has the light of God upon him. Together the children in the two lower left lights symbolise innocence, acceptance and powerlessness; the fundamental conditions which facilitate the connection between an individual and God. Jesus holds a star in his hand, lighting the darkness surrounding the children: he is not only welcoming them, but is also calling all who wish to be followers into his kingdom.



The Holy Trinity is presented in a more abstract form, behind and above Jesus: the glow of light in the centre represents God; the stars streaming from the central lights, the Holy Spirit. Their presence is most appropriate given that the church is dedicated to the Holy Trinity.

What is of interest in this window is the way that humanity and Godliness, simplicity and power have been divided through the combination of figurative characters and abstraction emphasising the juxtaposition of abstract spiritual values and everyday life. Whittaker has again shown her ability to be experimental in terms of the overall design yet maintains a balance between sensitively drawn figures and geometric pattern and shape. The simplicity found in the seated boy and the power of the vortex of circles do not fight one another, but rather draw the viewer into the design, lead by the children first to Jesus and then to the power of the Holy Trinity.



This window should be seen as a development of Whittaker's abstracted work in Beverley Minster's retro-quire and the figurative style of *The Four Seasons* window at St Peter and St Mary, Stowmarket. This design at Rothwell demonstrates that tradition and innovation can be successfully combined without losing the integrity of draftsmanship or detracting from the excitement of abstraction. ■

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