

Peregrination: Helen Whittaker's new set of works on the theme of Pilgrimage

Dr. Juliette MacDonald, Edinburgh College of Art, March 2009

On 21 March 2009 a service of dedication took place in St. Mary's Church, Community & Conference Centre, Bramall Lane, Sheffield, conducted by Dr. John Sentamu, Archbishop of York. The subject of the dedication is a new set of works by Helen Whittaker of Barley Studios that consists of a large five-light East window and two sculptures on either side of the nave. [Figure 1] Whilst the scale, combination of media and the theme of pilgrimage make it clear that this installation has much in common with her 2004 work Pilgrimage for the Retro-Quire at Beverley Minster it is also apparent that Whittaker is continuing on her own journey of growth and exploration and has not opted for a simple re-working of that material.

Psalm 84 provides the starting point for Whittaker's exploration of the theme and it can be divided into three parts: longing, travel and trust in God. The Psalmist is homesick and longs to be in God's House, the temple of Zion (Jerusalem). Weak with longing for that worshipful experience he nonetheless has a certainty in his destination. Despite the



rigours of the journey the psalmist remains confident in God, that He will not give him more than he can bear, and this belief is borne out by the early rains which appear as he travels through the harsh desert of the valley of Baca. Finally the pilgrim understands that trust is the key to a successful pilgrimage, since God secures the protection of all who earnestly make their way to Him.

The window [Figure 2] follows a similar structure to the psalm itself in that it is divided into three (horizontal) sections. Light, colour and dramatic geometric swirls represent the pilgrim pathways and reflect the rich symbolism in the psalm. The journey begins with a pathway that sweeps diagonally across the lower half of the window from the bottom left corner, representing the dry valley. Through this treacherous landscape two adults and a child can be seen making their way towards the House of God. Droplets of rain fall, creating refreshing pools on the pathway and the lush green area at the top of the fourth light in this section, symbolising the sense of hope found at the meeting point between the earthly and spiritual pathways.

In the upper half of the window bright orange, yellow and gold announce the heart of the composition. Here is the House of God, a place of security inhabited by the dove of Peace. Radiating upwards from the House of God, numerous triangular fragments symbolising the Holy Spirit radiates from the apex towards the wider universe.

The Sculptures

Either side of the sanctuary are semi-abstract copper sculptures. [Figures 3 and 4] These life-size figures of a man and a woman are

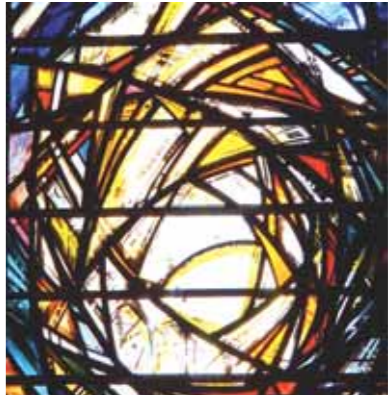


intended to bring the meaning and abstract language of the stained glass much closer to our own human scale and physicality. Emerging from triangles of copper at their base, the figures become more densely modelled and intricate as these elemental forms rise. Whittaker comments that: "The triangular shapes not only symbolise the three-fold nature of God – that divine love which created us, redeems us and gives us form – but also remind us of the relationship between the sculpture and the shards of glass in the window."

The abstract forms found within both the window and the sculptures create dense decorative patterns. In a recent article on icons, Dr. Rowan Williams comments on their decorative element: 'Icons remind you that art at its deepest is not just decorative, there is an element of epiphany'. [Dr. Rowan Williams 'Picture Perfect' in R.A. Winter 2008, p44] The scheme in Sheffield shares this idea, offering the viewer an opportunity to seek new insights and meditate on the meanings in our daily lives.

Whittaker's new work in Sheffield will undoubtedly provide a strong message to the people who meet at the church, community and conference centre. Dee Dyas, Director of Christianity and Culture, York, had commented in 2007 on the complexity and the degree of influence pilgrimage has on our lives: "[...] pilgrimage is not a single idea but a cluster of images which generate a variety of patterns. Together, these multiple understandings of pilgrimage have profoundly influenced patterns of living across many cultures, through many centuries [...]." [Dee Dyas <http://www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage/intro.html>] ■

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Beverley Minster, Retro-Quire Detail of Pilgrim Window

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