

Praying with Images

by Peter Reiss

We all have favourite pictures, and most of us have favourite buildings.

We see pattern, and light, colour and contrast. Over the centuries so many artists have been drawn to paint or sculpt or make images using the Christian tradition and story as their basis.

Our churches have images in the windows, and items of beauty and significance. Even their architecture is designed to help us worship – there is a focus on the altar or Communion Table where we share bread and wine; there is a focus on the lectern and pulpit from where Scripture is read and we hear God's word. Our eyes are often drawn up to the high ceiling inside, and outside to the tower or spire, traditionally pointing us to God above. A church should stand in its community and for its community, not separate.

In a world where most things are utilitarian, we are learning again how important it is to have things of beauty and things of significance. A church should point to the sacred, and to the presence and majesty and love of God.

This week choose a picture or image that you find striking or spiritually significant and spend some time reflecting on it; find a different picture each day. Families could let each member choose something that they feel will help us in our faith and our praying, it might be something familiar or it may be a classic work of art or building.

It might be a kneeling desk to remind us to pray, or an organ to remind us of our music. It might be an intricate pattern in nature, or a picture of the majesty of creation.

Why not make it your background for the day, on your phone or I-pad or computer.

***He gave us eyes to see them and lips that we might tell
How great is God Almighty who has made all things well***

We can also pray with our eyes open as we look at the ordinary things in life, as we look at what we have in our cupboards we can thank God for his goodness to us. As we look at family photos we can pray for the people, as we walk we can pray for the people, businesses, schools etc; as we sit and look up, we can rest in God our Creator and Redeemer.

Monday - Classic Art

There are so many pictures we could consider but here are two that speak to me.

This is by Zurbaran (date about 1640) – called 'Agnus Dei'

or *Lamb of God*.



It is very realistic, and the legs of the lamb are bound forming the shape of a cross. The creature is helpless – and we see expression in its eyes and its resignation, but is it pain, or sadness, or .. ? In the stark plain back-ground the lamb is out of its normal environment. There is nothing else for us to see, just the lamb, bound and helpless.

On Good Friday we remember the sacrifice of Jesus: God, the Creator, the Almighty, the willing sacrifice, bound, powerless and ill-treated.

In many ways I find this picture more powerful and moving than the pictures of the crucifixion – partly because we don't know what Jesus really looked like, and party because this picture makes us respond – what is our reaction? How do we take that into our prayers, and our understanding of what Jesus has done for us.

***Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth
All we like sheep have gone astray,
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him, the iniquity of us all.***

Isaiah 53



Here is a second and very different image – it is a small part of the ceiling painted by Michael Angelo in the Sistine Chapel.

It shows God's finger and the hand of Adam. God is still reaching out to Adam, but there is a separation

The bigger image is here.



You have to look up to see it, and so much of the detail is not really visible to those on the ground. There are all sorts of other figures and the symbolism is complex. However in this simple image, we see, visually, that there is both a separation now between God and humanity – which is described in Genesis 3 – and God continues to reach out. You could write hundreds of words to try and “explain” this, but the hand of God reaching out, but separate visualises this vividly. As I look at the bigger picture God seems to be making more effort than Adam! It is of course only a picture.

We live in a world where we are both separate from God, and where we believe God continues to seek us and be concerned for us. We have a freedom as well as the limitations of life. We can fail to see or heed God’s reaching to us but we are reminded that God is ever searching for us and in Jesus has come to share our life and open the way back to God.

Tuesday – Modern Art and Sculpture

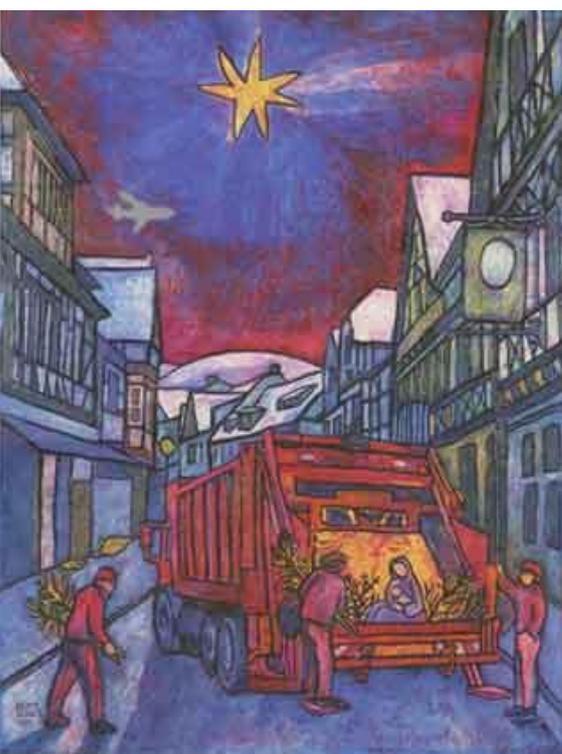
Many of us will know this painting – by Salvador Dali.

Jesus hangs on the cross and the world is below, particularly what looks like the Sea of Galilee and the fishing boats that Jesus and his disciples would have known, but he is cut off from them.

It was painted in 1951 but it was inspired by a sketch from St John of the Cross from the 16th century.

The light makes a shadow of one of the arms helping form a triangle shape that some say speaks of the Trinity.

More obviously and peculiarly, there are no nails



holding Jesus to the Cross.

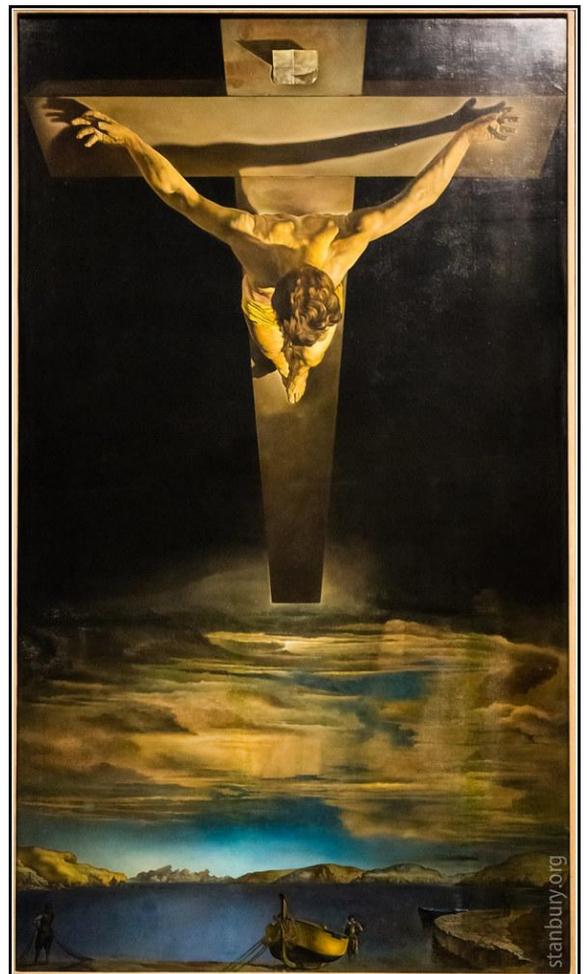
Dali said he had a vision about how to depict Jesus,

but we might want to suggest that Jesus “chose” the way of the Cross voluntarily, even if he was also forcibly tortured and executed.

Artists can help us explore new ways of seeing things, and open new windows of thought.

My second painting is by a German artist – Beate Heinen. The painting is entitled ‘*Mullwagen*’ or ‘*Garbage Truck*’.

It is a humorous, modern and challenging take on the Incarnation.



The Holy Family are in the Rubbish Lorry – have they been put there, or was this the only place they could find. It rather looks as if they are put there along with the Christmas decorations, while above the star shines and a plane heads for some unknown destination, but maybe they have been there all along.

In a disposable and secular world, does this provoke us or do we pass on by?

Help us think afresh, anew and more deeply and so grow in faith

Wednesday – The Art in our churches – the Architecture of our Churches

All the churches in our Team have stained, coloured glass – some more than others. Have you stopped to look at what they depict.



Most recently, St Andrew's commissioned a window depicting the fisherman, St Andrew, and there is a goodly catch of fish. Above the cross and the patterns suggest the mast, sails and wind from the boat, but are also a reminder that we are called, like Andrew to follow the way of Jesus and the Cross.

As our churches re-open have a look at the pictures and the images in the stained glass in our churches.

The architecture of our churches also should help us worship and pray.

Our eyes are drawn forwards (to Communion Table, Cross and Bible.

The Communion Rail is a place where all are equal before God.

Our eyes are drawn up, even our newer buildings have height reminding us that we are God's creatures.

In so many ways – and over so many years – people have beautified our churches – silver Communion vessels – beautifully made frontals for the Communion Table.

And there are memorials and things given in bequest. They remind us that we are part of the Communion of Saints, part of God's people through time, remembering those who have worshipped before us and – I hope – praying for those who will come after us.

And a church should be a practical place, where we gather and from where we are sent out. We want pictures by the children; space for tea and coffee, space to gather is important. A church is not a show-case of the past, but should be a living used, breathing building.

So our eyes should be drawn forwards and up, but they should also ***look around*** at the ordinary things, and at each other (for we are the church – the building just houses us!), and we should crucially ***look out*** and know that the church buildings are set in their communities, and are there for the communities and an open door is as important as the lectern, the Communion Table and the seats where we gather.

Thank God for our church buildings and let them help you find new ways to pray.

Praying with Art and Images Thursday

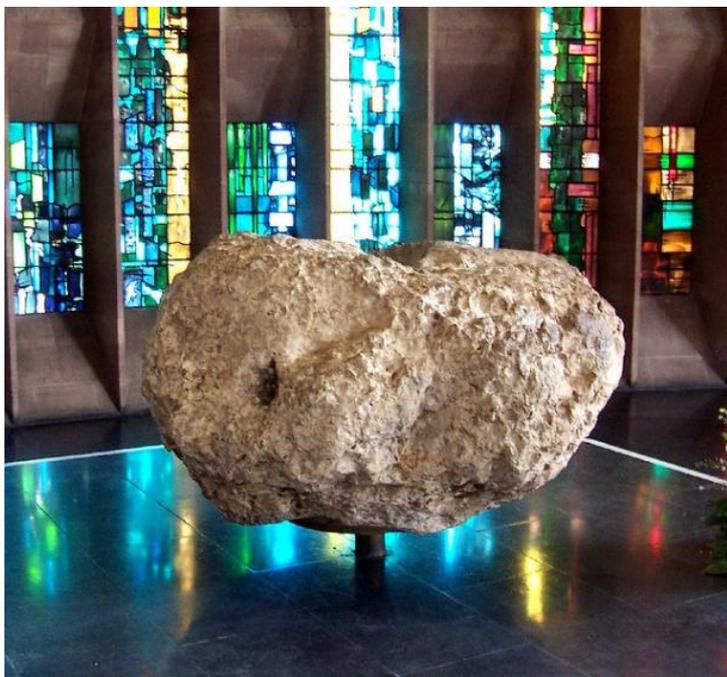
Coventry Cathedral ~ A Modern Classic

Architecture, and not only Church Architecture, can be a starting point for prayer. Today we take one example – a cathedral rebuilt after WW2 with large, vivid expressions of our faith, often in new mediums.

In what ways do these features, and the others given below, help you to draw nearer to God's presence?

Does one form of expression speak to you more clearly than another?

Where are your favourite churches and stained-glass, or sculptures?



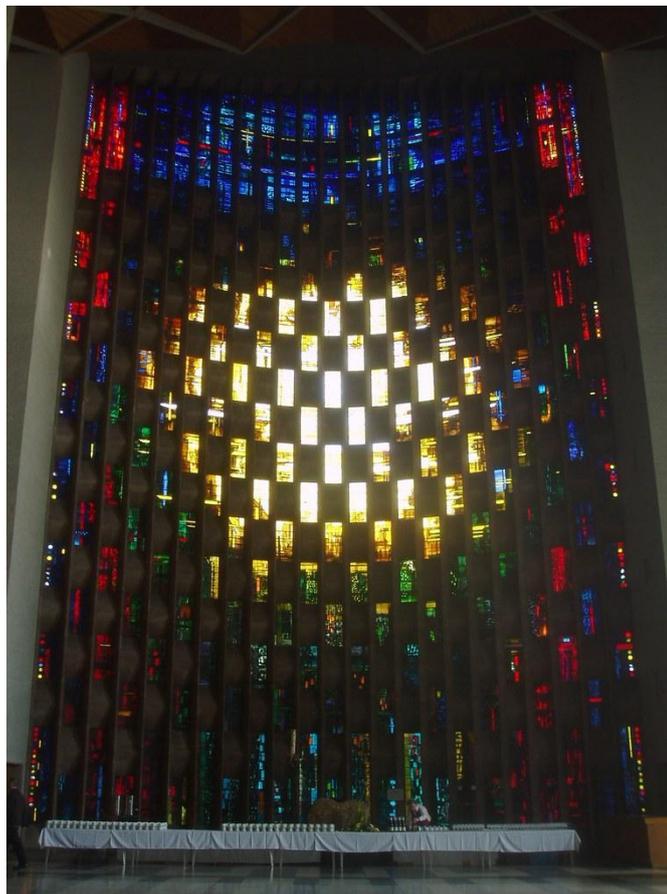
The baptistry window above uses light to show the light of Christ, whereas the font itself is fashioned from a piece of natural rock.

The larger than life bronze sculpture symbolises the victory of good over evil, showing a winged angel with spear, standing with arms and legs spread above the bound figure of the horned devil.

What do these works of art make you feel?

Do they help to bring you closer to God?

by Chris Jamieson



St Michael's Victory over the Devil

Sculpture by Jacob Epstein (*below*)



Christ in Glory – Tetramorph

Tapestry by Graham Sutherland.



The tapestry depicts a seated Risen Christ, within an oval mandorla on a green background, surrounded by the symbols of the Four Evangelists: a lion for St Mark, an eagle for St John, a calf for St Luke, and an angel for St Matthew; these are the tetramorph (four shapes) of the title. The Christ figure wears a white robe, and is sitting on a throne, face on, with both hands raised towards his face. Loops around the head suggest a halo. Between his feet is a life sized figure of a man, made diminutive by the colossal scale of the Christ-figure. At the base of the tapestry is a small Crucifixion scene.

Choose one of the illustrations and use it as a focus for prayer.

See if you can find another piece of architectural art, or make one for yourself, which speaks to you of God's glory

Friday Land Art

***For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth over and around us lies:
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.***

The nature of Land Art is that it is temporary, it will disappear perhaps with the incoming tide, blown away by the wind or simply walked over. This does not make it any less real, for the time that it is visible it alters the local environment it causes us to look at everyday objects in a different way.



There is so much beauty in our world and so much that can inspire the imagination that sometimes it can be useful to take a small part of that beauty and use it as the focus for our prayers.

By looking at the world of nature around us, finding examples of God's creation and arranging them in such a way that focuses our attention we can create a unique image that talks to us of God's love and care.

Find some natural materials and make your own design, as your focal point for prayer.



***God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform:
he plants his footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.***

See if you can find a picture or photograph of a piece of natural beauty and use this as a basis for prayer.



There are many ways in which you could use Land Art as a prayer; look for natural beauty and pattern; focus and keep your eyes peeled and your senses alert as you are out and about in the local environment and you will be surprised what catches your imagination.

***God brought order out of chaos,
he created all things
and he saw that it was very good.***

Try making an ordered pattern so that you can appreciate the symmetry and interconnectedness of the constituent parts. Thank God for the beauty and consistency of his creation.

Perhaps you could use some of the ideas suggested here to create your own Easter garden.

Pictures included on these pages are by Jon Foreman

sculpttheworld.smugmug.com

More of his Land Art can be seen on the website.

