

St Mary's Church Barnard Castle

Taking a Look Through St. Mary's Windows



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During Lent 2001 members of the parish congregation spent five weeks looking at aspects of the Christian faith as shown through the stained glass of the church windows.

Many visitors to the church comment on the beauty of the glass in our church. None of the windows are particularly ancient (most were placed in church following a major restoration of the building in the 1860s) - the choice of subject matter however is interesting. We hope that you will find this simple introduction both helpful and challenging as you engage with the Christian tradition that our building proclaims.

The windows considered are:

- a) The West window: military matters
- b) The south aisle: women in Jesus' life
- c) The North transept: saints and sinners
- d) The South side of the Chancel: Jesus, a Passion for you
- e) The North side of the Chancel: Resurrection appearances

a) Military matters: the West window.

The dedication of this window to the memory of a prominent soldier sets the tone for its subject matter. The Fusiliers' emblem of an exploding bomb can be seen at the top of the window. The four main scenes depicted all involve 'men at arms'. Namely (bottom left) the crossing of the Red Sea and the annihilation of the Egyptians following the Exodus (Exodus 14:21ff); (bottom right) the entry of the ark of the covenant into the Promised land through the parting of the waters of the River Jordan (Joshua 4:10-24); (Centre left) Jesus responding to a request to heal a centurion's slave (Luke 7:1-10) and (centre right) the centurion Cornelius being told that his prayers have been answered (Acts 10)

The Christian church's relationship to the military has frequently been fraught and misunderstood. Barnard Castle was, for many years a military town: the Durham militia had their barracks off Newgate, the Durham Light Infantry were based here. The church houses colours from as far back as the Peninsular War; the inner porch doors were erected following the Great War; there is a memorial to those who fought in S. Africa just inside the church doors.

Whatever one's thoughts about conflict between nations the church has always sought to minister to individual's needs. The soldiers who are commemorated in memorials were sons, daughters, parents of local people who found in the church strength in the face of loss, despair and fear.

The message of the New Testament panels contrasts with that from the Old Testament panels beneath. Whereas the Old testament stories depicted show God allying Himself with the Israelites against their enemies in the New Testament stories shown the Gospel of God's love reaches beyond the confines of one nation and is seen to extend to 'foreigners' as well. In the end Jesus shows that we are all members of God's One family.

b) Women in Jesus' Life: The South aisle.

Although much of the detail of this window has faded the subject matter is just visible in its three panels. Whilst the modern church has been criticised for being a 'male dominated' institution here we see Jesus relating to women: unusual in first century Judaism.

The left panel: (John 12) Jesus is anointed with costly ointment by Mary whilst Judas (clutching a money bag with '30' on it) complains. Is there a place for extravagance in our worship of Christ? The ointment in the story was valued at the equivalent of a year's wages: what do we offer our God? When was the last time

we ministered to Jesus rather than for Him?

Centre panel: (Mark 5:24ff) A woman suffering from haemorrhages touches Jesus robe and is healed. Despite the debilitating and embarrassing nature of the woman's medical problem Jesus encourages her to declare her faith. Why? Is this Him showing the woman to be part of the wider community again (her condition made her ritually unclean)? Is there, for all of us, a point where a public declaration of faith becomes important for our own spiritual growth?

Right hand panel: (Luke 10:38ff) Whilst Mary is commended for devoting her time to listening to Jesus, Martha fusses over the housekeeping. When were we last still, quiet and able to listen to Christ?

c) Saints and Sinners: The North Transept

Dedicated to the memory of stalwart members of the church (see inscriptions) these two windows look to the history of Northern Christianity for their subject matter: Hilda of Whitby, King Oswald and Saint Aidan. The florid texts that weave their way through these windows are well worth reading.

The left window: Commemorating a dedicated Sunday School Teacher, St. Hilda is portrayed as an example to all of a faithful Christian woman passing on the faith to the next generation. How is this task to be fulfilled now? From a heyday in the 1950's when 80% of children attended Sunday schools under 10% of children come under the church's influence in this way now. In many places the model of the 'school' for Christian formation simply served to encourage older children to leave the church upon reaching maturity with Confirmation turning into a 'passing out parade'.

Right window: the earliest Christian mission to the North East is recalled. The church of the 21st century is called to be a 'missionary church'. Since the decline of

the Sunday School movement large parts of our population have no grounding in the Christian faith whatsoever: in order to reverse this trend churches are finding new ways to reach adults with the Christian gospel.

d) Jesus: a Passion for you: the chancel, south side.

Note that this window 'reads' from right to left as it tells the story of the Maundy Thursday washing of the disciple's feet by Jesus (John 13), Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32ff) and his appearance before the High Priest (Mark 14:53)

One wonders why the church has no depiction in its glass of the crucifixion. Was it felt that the chancel (containing, as it does, the altar) already speaks of Christ's sacrifice and death? The other windows here show scenes from the resurrection and, unusually, the Ascension (east window).

e) Resurrection appearances: The north side of the chancel

Dedicated to the memory of Mary Watson another Mary is shown meeting with the risen Christ on the first Easter Day (John 20)

The resurrection accounts given to us in the four gospels are full of ambiguity and confusion and reveal the earliest Christian writers struggling to make sense of their experience of Christ. We are still however, asked the question 'What took place on that day?' Down the centuries St. Mary's has borne witness to a belief that Christ is alive, that he can be known and that God's love for us all is stronger even than death. This message has sustained and encouraged all manner of people and continues to change the lives of St. Mary's parishioners as it is celebrated each Sunday, the day of resurrection.