

Events of salvation and moments of intimacy (printable version, small file)



At Littlemore there is a remarkable triptych of windows over the high altar. I used not to like it much, but over the years it has exercised some power over me, and now, after serving the liturgy and praying in the sanctuary for the last seven years, I have begun to grow quite fond of it. And what is more, I have recognised the pastoral power that shines forth from these three strongly representational panels. The windows simply depict the three great events of the life of our Saviour, which have wrought salvation for our broken world. The depiction of these events are surrounded by pictorial references to Old and New Testament stories as well as by artistically arranged quotations from the liturgy.

The dominant colours are blue, white and a deep red. The windows never shine in their full glory, being shaded by an ancient yew tree that thrives behind the sanctuary of the church. The artist is Louis Davis (1861-1941), who was brought up in Abingon, near Oxford, and educated at Abingdon School. The window was installed at Littlemore in about 1902 to commemorate a predecessor of mine, Vernon Thomas Green (Vicar, 1872-1896). Davis was an important member of 'arts and craft' movement as well as the beginnings of the art nouveau, and started his career as an illustrator for the English Illustrated Magazine and later designed prints for the Fitzroy Picture Society and the Medici Society. In about 1890 he began to learn the techniques of glass painting with Christopher Whall, lodging with him at his house in Dorking.

On first viewing it one may well be put off by the strong use of cliché. Joseph, for example in the 'nativity window' is presented to us as an old European type with a beard, and other figures also appear to be dressed in medieval garb. The baroque-cherubic angels may seem sentimental and irrelevant, but it is exactly these clichés that Louis Davis is prepared to play with and work with, in order to get his audience to receive a new insight into the depth of our reconciliation. For in each of the windows he has added an aspect of intimacy that has the potential of bringing these 2000-year-old events right close to us into our homes and hearts. And he does so more and more daringly and personally as we go from Christmas through to Easter.

In the Christmas window (left middle panel) the scene looks traditional enough. But if you look closely, you can see a Littlemore landmark comfortably sitting in the background. This is St George's House, one of the few remaining historic buildings in this mainly Victorian and council-house dominated parish, where Newman is said to have lodged during the early part of his ministry here. Christmas may have happened 2000 years ago, but its reverberation can be felt here in Littlemore today.

Louis Davies chooses the event described in St John Gospel 20, 27 for his depiction of the crucifixion (centre middle panel). Jesus looks down from the cross and greets his mother with the words "Woman, behold your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" In his dying Jesus originates the new family of the church. The disciple and Mary are virtually hugging the cross and they are holding hands, a gesture that might be wholly understandable, but in my limited knowledge Christian iconography not depicted in this way elsewhere. Over the years this has struck me as a

very simple, powerful and truthful expression of what is after all at the heart of our experience: the agony and death of Christ transforms our inability to form an intimate relationship with God. We all know that this is so and that it should be so. But we do not know why the suffering of Christ apparently is necessary. Traditionally we are pointed to the depth of our sin to find the answer to this question. But Louis Davies helps us to lift our heads and to behold the sheer love contained in this strange sacrifice.

The word 'strange' in the context of Christ's suffering comes to my mind, because one of the greater challenges that our contemporary world might want to put to us, is, to explain the cross itself. After all we now live in a world that has become so 'humane' that physical suffering must and will be controlled at all cost. For Christians to continue to invest suffering with redemptive significance poses a counter-cultural dilemma. In a world where suffering is not really understood to have redemptive power we can look again at those early images of the crucifixion of Norman and pre-Norman times. Here Christ's face does not radiate agony but love and pity. It is this tradition which the artist revives.

The intimacy of the resurrection (right middle panel) is hidden in the interplay of his art and the private life of Louis Davis. He married a servant girl, and was consequently cut off from his severe Victorian family, and never saw any of them ever again. But the marriage was apparently a happy and long-lasting one; his wife is a central feature in his art, the model for some of the key characters in his paintings and windows.

Here the artist chooses the story of Mary Magdalene supposing the risen Christ to be the gardener (John 20,11-18). For those who know Davis's work, it is clear that his own wife is the model for Mary Magdalene here. The moment depicted is the moment of recognition "Mary/Rabboni". The window gives a sense of transcended intimacy. The 'Noli me tangere' is not met with incomprehension on the part of Mary, but with a sense of confidence in her own worth rooted in her love for Christ. The mystery of intimacy expressed in deeply personal terms. The touching may be over, but Davis conveys a closeness of a new kind that leaves us with a glow of the mystery of redemption.

It is a much analysed fact in our culture that the majority of people describe themselves as 'spiritual' and a large majority of them would even want to describe themselves as 'Christian', and yet most of these do not feel any loyalty to any church or liturgy. The church is not able to engage the spiritual imagination of many believers, let alone those who have lost faith altogether. Could it be that 'formal churches' are not good at providing a setting for intimacy with God?