

The Road to Emmaus – A personal journey of discovery through art.

Have you seen but a bright lily grow,
Before rude hands have touch'd it?
Ha' you mark'd but the fall o' the snow
Before the soil hath smutch'd it?
Ha' you felt the wool o' the beaver?
Or swan's down ever?
Or have smelt o' the bud o' the briar?
Or the nard in the fire?
Or have tasted the bag of the bee?
Oh so white! Oh so soft! Oh so sweet is she!

Since you have come here to listen to a talk about art and Christianity, you might perhaps be asking yourselves what this bit of poetry about a pretty woman has to do with the subject. I will try to explain.

Many years ago, when I was an undergraduate, reading English at that Cotswold university not far from here, one of my tutors asked the question whether all great art had to be moral. My response was to quote the lines above from Ben Jonson's *A Celebration of Charis*, declaring that they were generally considered to be an example of great art, and that, though they were undoubtedly beautiful, I didn't see that they had anything to do with morality. His response was simply, “beauty is important.”

His statement was a revelation to me, which has profoundly affected my life, carrying the realisation that “importance” lies at the very base of all morality, for morality ultimately depends upon, and exists only because of, the recognition of a sense of values.

Today, what many would call “mainstream art” – that is, the sort of art promoted by the art establishment - has become very much a matter of self-promotion; a part of the culture of economic growth, and is seen as such both by artists and art institutions. A former Master of the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford, wrote,

“Every artist must be able to ask themselves [*sic*] when they complete a new piece of work a set of questions. Is it any good? Is it new? Does it achieve the objectives I set myself or go beyond them? Is it just a remake of something I or someone else has made before? What will my audience, my dealer think of it? Will it extend my audience? Will it add to my reputation? Will it make me famous?”

Apart from the possible exception of the short “is it any good”, which, in this context, might or might not have moral connotations, none of this has anything to do with what would have been considered of serious importance by my old tutor, and goes far beyond the concerns about “personality” that bothered E.M Forster over half a century ago, when he wrote:

“The demand that literature should express personality is far too insistent these days, and I look back with longing to the earlier modes of criticism where a poem was not an expression but a discovery, and was sometimes supposed to have been shown to the poet by God,”

If there is such a discovery, it is like being on the road to Emmaus, where one can find oneself accompanied by a greater presence than one's own.

One of the real problems of a view of art based on self-promotion, is that the self-importance on which it is grounded is in the end without meaning.

Unfortunately, what is considered “mainstream” art, promoted by art-schools, by the Turner Prize, by many major museums and galleries of art, and funded by the Arts Council, is oblivious to that and has produced some of the dreadful excesses of such things as the “Sensations” exhibition. Fortunately, however, very little art that is produced is actually mainstream art. There is the prolific public work of someone like Philip Jackson, who produced the Bomber Command memorial and the beautiful and thought-provoking statue of St. Richard of Chichester, which invites the viewer to want to find more out about the saint;



It has particular significance for me, for I produced a sculpture of Richard's friend and mentor, the Archbishop of Canterbury, St Edmund of Abingdon.



Both men were learned, self-denying and utterly sincere. It is important that their lives should be celebrated and not forgotten.

This is true too, of the martyrs in Rory Young's rood screen at St. Alban's Abbey, close to my home in Hertfordshire, and whose beautifully fluid and meaningful depiction of the hands of people who make things adorn the New Brewery Arts here in Cirencester.



There are many others, producing meaningful work both religious and secular. In France, I recently came across the sculptor Emmanuel Kieffer, whose work in steel reflects both a love of horses and his emotional connection with his family's business as farriers. He is driven by the desire and necessity of creating something

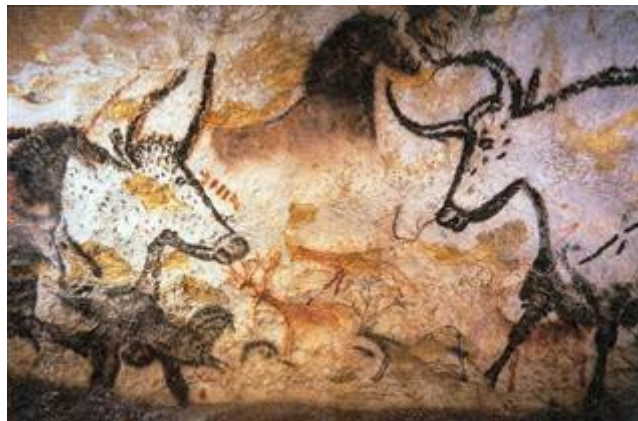


Recently, wandering along mountain paths in the Pyrenees, I came across this chicken coop.



It was built by a young local shepherd to protect his poultry from foxes. What a truly beautiful creation – so much more valuable, surely, than something like Tracy Emin's *Unmade Bed*. As Keats said, “a thing of beauty is a joy forever.” And beauty is important.

Ultimately, across the centuries, art has mostly been about beauty and value, which is why people have made images for an unimaginably long time. Non-representational designs in ochre estimated to be 75,000 to 100,000 years old have been found in the Blombos cave in South Africa, and attempts to make non-representational marks on objects go back much further still, even predating *homo sapiens*, when, some 450,000 years ago, *homo erectus* engraved what are considered to be geometrical patterns on freshwater shells in Java. Probably the best known prehistoric paintings and sculptures are to be found in caves in southern France and Spain. Ranging between 11,000 and 40,000 years old, these are largely representational, and executed with evident skill and anatomical knowledge.



With the French cave paintings, their situation, so deep within the caves that one wonders why people would have taken the trouble to go so far, adds to the mystery. In Niaux, all the paintings proper are to be found where the cave system opens out into a huge area under an enormous vault, where there are amazing natural acoustics. The guides liken it to a cathedral and speak about the drama that must have existed when these paintings were seen in the flickering light of fires and torches, especially if accompanied by chanting. Of course, we cannot know, in the end, why these paintings were produced, though generally it is thought that they had some sort of religious or at least magical significance. All we know for sure is that they are the expression of a need to produce and to see images that goes back to the very beginning of human existence.

It is only when we have the written word that we have any idea about why people made works of art. The oldest records are possibly in Exodus, written around 2,500 years ago, but dependent on oral tradition which would have considerably pre-dated them. Here we have two of the earliest descriptions of the making of artefacts. One describes God's instructions for his sanctuary, given to Moses on Mount Sinai, which involved the making of golden cherubim for the ark of the covenant, embroidered ones for the curtains of its walls and roof, and decorative almond blossom for a golden lampstand; the other is a description of the making of the golden calf by the Israelites, which so infuriated both God and Moses, while Moses was absent on the mountain. The calf contradicted God's prohibition in the Ten Commandments against the making of graven images of “any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” The cherubim and the almond blossom of course, broke the commandment too, and from this confused juxtaposition of accounts arose a conflict of ideas about the nature of art in religious usage, that spans the centuries from then until now, and rests on the difference between icon and idol. It is a fascinating subject in itself, but unfortunately I don't have the time to go into detail with it here, unless we are to continue all night, except to say that the French philosopher and theologian, Jean-Luc Marion said that the difference was that whereas the idol acted as a mirror, reflecting the

image of the viewer back on himself, the icon was like a sheet of glass through which one looked to see God.

The icon, indeed, has frequently been describes as “a window into heaven.” You have one such icon in this church.

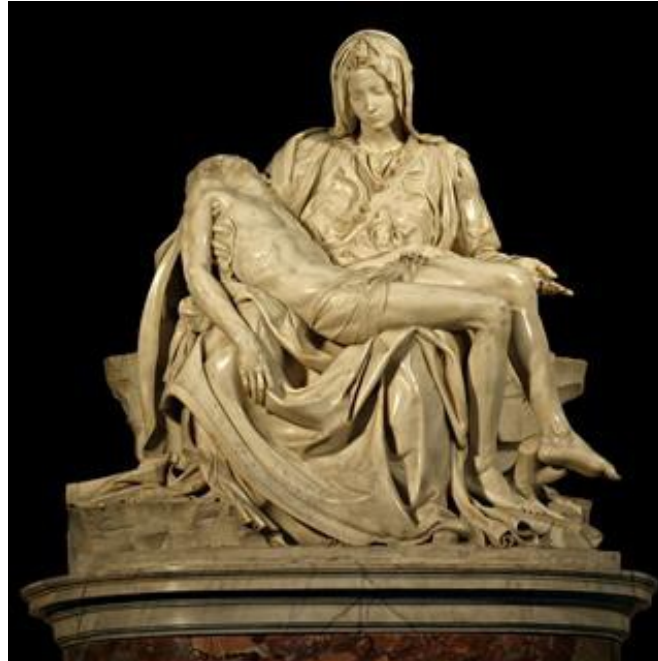


Icons have usually been seen as an act of prayer, in which the artist is of no importance and in which the artist's own emotions are unsought and deliberately avoided. The images are produced according to formulae that have specific religious connotations. They are symbolic rather than realistic. After the great waves of Byzantine iconoclasm passed, icons returned to the churches in the east, and they are still being produced to this day within the eastern church, the art of which remains conservatively symbolic. The art of the church in the west, which was unaffected by Byzantine iconoclasm, took a different direction and moved away from the symbolic abstraction of icons towards a striving after realism. Here, facial and bodily gestures become important, and one feels, in paintings such as Giotto's *Kiss of Judas*, painted as the 13th century turned into the 14th, that there is a real desire to depict emotion, and to relate to and understand the feelings of those portrayed.



The desire for anonymity within an act of prayer has moved to another kind of prayerfulness, that of Christian humanism.

This reaches its summit with Michelangelo, and the start of Mannerism, where we begin to see the beginnings of a move, once more, away from the strict realism which the Renaissance had been striving for as it moved away from the abstractions of the icon. Michelangelo's figures were at first a search for natural beauty, as in his first Pieta, produced when he was only 24.



Later his work became idealised and then immense; an image, not of man as he is, but as the neo-platonist and Christian-humanist ideal of man, created in the image of God.



As such, the figures that span the Sistine ceiling and altar wall are truly impressive as direct expressions of a sincere and very personal faith. Throughout his life, Michelangelo declared his beliefs openly, and frequently took uncompromising and potentially dangerous positions. While working for the warrior Pope Julius, he wrote the following lines in one of his poems:

*Here helms and swords are made of chalices:
The blood of Christ is sold so much the quart:
His cross and thorns are spears and shields; and short
Must be the time ere even his patience cease.
Nay let him come no more to raise the fees
Of this foul sacrilege beyond report!
For Rome still flays and sells him at the court,
Where paths are closed to virtue's fair increase.*

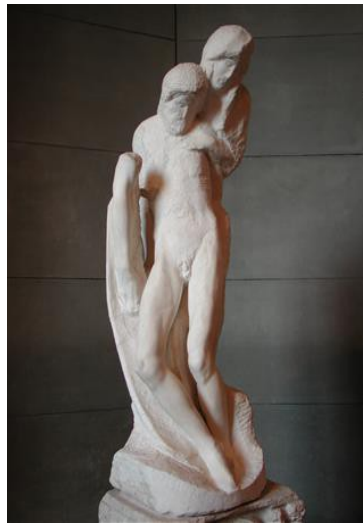
When Michelangelo was 72, he started a work that might be either a pietà or a deposition, which he had originally intended for his tomb, and on which he worked, on and off, for eight years. The figure in the background, normally taken to represent Nicodemus, is almost certainly a self portrait.



Assuming it is, the sculpture would have been a declaration of Michelangelo's faith, as he stands by the crucified Christ. However, at the age of eighty, he took a hammer to it and started to break it. The usual reasons given for this are that the marble was faulty (which indeed it was, as has been shown in recent restoration work) and that Michelangelo, a perfectionist, was frustrated by it. After eight years of working with the sculpture, however, this hardly seems to be a totally acceptable answer, and it has been suggested that the reason might lie in a more political direction.

Michelangelo had become a member of the *Spirituali* movement, which was influenced by Protestant thinking, and believed in redemption through personal faith. The movement was opposed with vigour by Pope Paul IV, who viewed it as heretical. Its members were subject to investigation by the inquisition, with the inevitable consequences of the time, and the movement evaporated. Adherents of the movement were sometimes called *Nicodemists*, a name which linked the group to Calvin, who had coined the term in connection with the need in France to avoid an overt profession of dissident belief in the face of catholic persecution. The term referred to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, who secretly “came to Jesus by night” for his counsel. If the image of Nicodemus in the sculpture were seen as a self-portrait, and its presence interpreted as a statement of intent, rather than simply as the traditional figure of Nicodemus, present at the deposition, it would have been an excuse to subject Michelangelo to the inquisition, and the Pope already mistrusted him and had suspended his stipend. Whatever the reason for the damage, the sculpture has fortunately been preserved. Michelangelo's servant asked him for the remains, which he sold on, and it was restored. It now resides in the Cathedral in Florence.

At about the time he finished working on this Pietà, Michelangelo started work on another one, which occupied him until just a few days before his death, at the age of 89.



It is his most enigmatic work, for it seems that after it had neared completion, Michelangelo changed his mind about what he was trying to achieve, and re-carved it. The right arm of Christ still remains from the original, which shows how much more massive the figures would have been. Looking at the legs, it would seem that in his alterations, Michelangelo firstly moved back towards figures more reminiscent of his first Pietà, representing ideal naturalistic beauty rather than the idealised symbols of human and divine grandeur which had developed during the course of his career. Then, however, he went further still, cutting the marble of the torsos farther and farther back. It is impossible to say what he was trying to achieve either in artistic or spiritual terms. In spite of its unfinished state, the lyricism of form within the sculpture is beautiful and full of pathos, and it is unsurprising that it has found resonance with many people across the centuries. Whatever Michelangelo was trying to achieve within it, one feels that it shows the final stages of a journey of faith.

After the death of Michelangelo, and as Mannerism turned into the Baroque, style became all, in a movement that showed that nothing exceeds like excess. From the sincerity of the icon as an anonymous act of prayer; from the desire to enter into the feelings of people and religious figures sought by Giotto, and from the emotional response to faith expressed in the work of Michelangelo, art moved to the production of religious kitsch, such as Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, where with consummate skill, he produces a dreadful mix of sentimentality and sexual innuendo.



At about the same time, however, in Northern Europe, Grünewald produced the Isenheim altarpiece for the Monastery of St. Anthony, within which there was a hospital. This has to be one of the most disturbing representations of the crucifixion in existence. Christ's body is in a position of dreadful agony, and he and those around the cross stand out starkly lit against a black and dismal background. The painting seems utterly without hope.



The hospital was renowned for its care of those who suffered from the plague, which, in addition to being fatal to most sufferers, caused the skin to erupt in sores. Like most hospitals of the time, the monastery was closer to what we would now term a hospice. People went there in the likelihood that they would die, rather than with any expectation of recovery. When you look closely at the painting, the body of Christ is covered in diseased skin, and its dismal but profound message is that God had partaken of human suffering in all its aspects, including that suffered by those within the hospital. It presents comfort from the depths of despair, and has to be one of the most moving religious paintings of all time.



Art, if it is to have any real purpose, should be a profession of a sense of values, and therefore Christian art should be a profession of faith, if it is to have meaning. With artists such as Grünewald and Michelangelo, it is clear that it was.

There has always been a tension between realism and abstraction, which is a reflection,

philosophically, of the tension between the ideal and the real. It is there, individually, within the work of many artists, as we have seen with Michelangelo. Historically, it sometimes seems that this tension creates a pendulum swinging backwards and forwards between the two, though in reality it is rather a reflection of differences of attitude across time or place. Thus, after the Baroque and Rococo movements, the visual arts in the west tended to settle into a fairly lengthy period of neo-classical realism, before artistic fashion moved back in the direction of abstraction. Generally speaking, Impressionism is seen as the reaction against the stilted realism that had gained control of the art establishment, and as the precursor of 20th century abstract art. In fact, English Romanticism was more significant.



Turner's painting, *Rain, Steam and Speed* predates Monet's painting of the *Gare St. Lazare* by thirty years.



However, it is every bit as impressionistic; and his painting of *The Deluge* is virtually pure abstraction.



After Impressionism, movements followed each other in rapid succession. Impressionism led to Cubism, and Cubism led to the abstraction of Picasso and Braque. Impressionism had heralded in an age of “isms.” Amongst others, there were fauvism, constructivism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, and ultra-realism. Most of these fell under the super-category of modernism, a somewhat bizarre term, since all art movements have been modern at some point; and this was then superseded by “post-modernism”, after which, one must assume, there can be nothing else. As if to counteract super-realism, post-modernism produced conceptualism, a move away from the realistic rather different from that seen at the beginning of the 20th century. Conceptualism sees even abstraction as too “realistic.” The former Master of the Ruskin School of Art, for instance, whom I quoted earlier, has proudly announced that “artists have become ideas people. They have more or less detached themselves from crafts and getting their hands dirty and have placed themselves in an executive, white-collar class.” He claims that “a craft based on a dream of creativity” is a *cul de sac*, stating that “few artists think that the dream is worth the risk, and quite clearly the audience and collectors no longer require them to take it.” It is a statement that could only be made at a time when old men no longer dream dreams, nor young men see visions.

God, quite clearly, was not concerned that people should see him as a white collar worker. If he had, his creation would have remained merely conceptual. Instead he was definitely involved in material creativity – if you like, in getting his hands dirty. First, He created the universe and the world, and all the living things within it, and at every stage, we have what appears to be a description of God's wonder at what he had done, as he stood back “and saw that it was good.” Finally, He made man, and man was disobedient.

At this point, I suppose I deviate from the traditional Anglican and Catholic view of original sin, for I do not see the point of the story in terms of sin and retribution. Rather, I see the story's importance as lying in it being a symbol of the creator liberating that which he has created, and therefore investing it with a reality of its own. The trees in the garden of Eden are a kind of temptation, but I see it as a temptation to choose. The trees were put in the garden before the creation of Adam and Eve. The original couple were therefore born into a situation where they could choose to break away from their creator's conception, and one has to consider that God, if he is both omniscient and omnipotent, wanted them to do so, or at the very least, knew that they would. As Milton wrote, some years before his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, “Many there be that complain of divine Providence for suffering Adam to transgress; foolish tongues! When God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam.” Moreover, if Adam and Eve had remained simply a concept within his mind, God could not have had a relationship with them; and that makes the Genesis story a paradigm for every act of creation. It is true of a child as it develops its own personality and grows away from its parents' conception (in both senses of the word), to become a person in its own right; and it is also true of a work of art. Unless the artist's creation moves and develops away from his initial thoughts, it might as well not exist, for it is still-born. The artist cannot have a relationship with it, for you cannot have a relationship with yourself, except in the worthless sense of narcissism.

This view of creation and its significance is fundamental to both my faith and my view of the arts, and it resulted in one of the few sculptures I have produced purely for my own satisfaction.

Called *The Creation of Adam and Eve*, it arose after I had made a small demonstration piece of Adam contemplating the apple. When I finished this, it immediately occurred to me that it would have been far better if I had represented Adam as only partly made, looking at the fruit which was complete. As a result, I thought about the Fall story more carefully, and at how it related creation, pro-creation, love and freedom.



In spite of that quote from Milton, the poet still spoke of the so-called “Fall” as the event which “brought death into the world and all our woe” - yet, ever the unconforming individualist, he was not quite able to accept the fact; and in *Paradise Lost* we are presented with Adam's acceptance of the apple from Eve, both as an act of sin, and as an act of self-sacrificial love. Despite understanding the consequences of accepting the apple, Adam took it because he could not bear to be parted from Eve, because he loved her; and Milton, although he goes on to describe the mutual recrimination that the two indulge in as the Fall starts to take effect, begins by describing Adam's love in very moving terms:

..... with thee
Certain my resolution is to Die;
How can I live without thee, how forgoe
Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly joyn'd,
To live again in these wilde Woods forlorn?

In this sense, the first Adam prefigures the second Adam, accepting death as an act of love. I wished, therefore, within the sculpture of the torsos, to express the love between the two, and to show it as arising from the creative act itself.



These thoughts led me on to think about redemption, which of course is at the heart of all Christianity; but this really became the centre of my thoughts with the commission here, for the combination of John the Baptist with the Virgin and Child, linked the themes of creation and redemption. The more I thought about it, the greater the significance of this grew, as I saw these themes being drawn together in the incarnation and its consequence, the crucifixion.

At this point, I need to say a little more about reality and abstraction, and how these relate to faith. Up until the 17th century, people's relationship with God – as is seen in the work of Michelangelo and Grunewald – was very personal; very “real,” George Herbert's poem, *Holy Baptism*, is, to my mind, a beautiful expression of that personal relationship in terms of those of a father and child..

*Since, Lord, to thee
A narrow way and little gate
Is all the passage, on my infancie
Thou didst lay hold, and antedate
My faith in me.
O let me still
Write thee great God, and me a childe:
Let me be soft and supple to thy will,
Small to my self, to others milde,
Behither ill.
Although by stealth
My flesh get on, yet let her sister
My soul bid nothing, but preserve her wealth:
The growth of flesh is but a blister;
Childhood is health.*

In the 18th century, industrialisation and the type of science that it fostered went hand in hand with the “Age of Reason,” in which Dr. Johnson could write this:

Whatever is great, desirable, or tremendous, is comprised in the name of the supreme being. Omnipotence cannot be exalted; infinity cannot be amplified; perfection cannot be improved. The employments of pious meditation are faith, thanksgiving, repentance, and supplication. Faith, invariably uniform, cannot be invested by fancy with decorations. Thanksgiving, the most joyful of all holy effusions, yet addressed to a being without passions, is confined to a few modes, and is to be felt rather than expressed. Repentance, trembling in the presence of the judge, is not at leisure for cadences and epithets. Supplication of man to man may diffuse itself through many topicks of persuasion; but supplication to God can only cry for mercy.

In this image of a God without passions, one cannot help asking what has happened to the second person of the Trinity.

At the beginning of the 19th century, science was becoming more abstruse, and Wordsworth, writing in the *Prelude*, described religious experience in these terms:

*I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air;
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:*

*A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.*

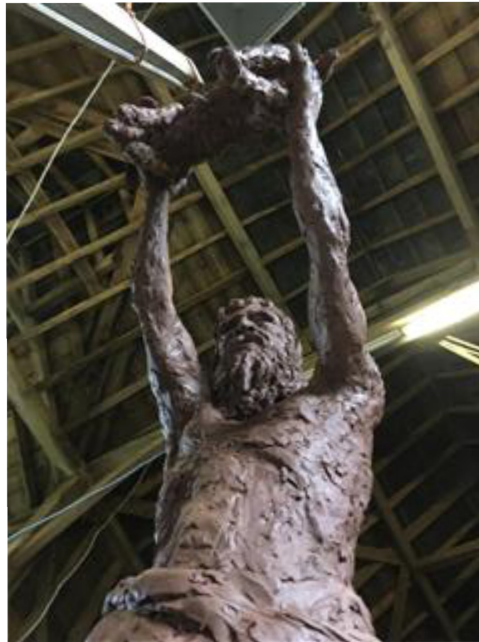
When I was a teenager, I thought that was very wonderful. It seemed a revelation of God, but it led me for a time to underestimate the relevance of Christ. My view soon changed. But science and philosophy – and indeed, to some extent, theology – have, it seems to me continued along that path. They seek a meaning behind the universe, but the meaning is not personal; it is abstract (or if you prefer, “ideal”) rather than real. In the 1950s, Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit biologist produced his stunning book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, in which he speaks of the Omega point, a point to which evolution is moving, and from which point evolution is directed. It is a profound religious work of science, but whilst within it De Chardin speaks of the importance of Christ, he doesn't say where that importance lies. More recently, the cosmologist John Barrow, in conjunction with the mathematician Frank Tippler, produced a book called *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*. It pursues the ideas of De Chardin, speaking of the extraordinarily improbable nature of the chance – if it is chance – of the existence of anything at all in the universe, which becomes more and more extraordinary as life develops and intelligence arrives. It is a beautiful, abstract view of the universe, which seeks for meaningfulness, but within it, the reality of Christ has no place.

So, after that little diversion, I will return to my commission here in Cirencester, because it has to do with the importance of the reality of God in Christ, which has increasingly become very important for me.

John's role is to announce that reality. To baptise Christ as a man, and to declare the reality of God within the world.



As he holds the lamb out over this town, I want it to be a statement of the reality rather than the abstraction of the words, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”



The Virgin and Child further the statement of this reality. The child Christ is a real child, leaning out of the niche in a position typical of a child's curiosity and fearlessness. But as his mother holds him there, he is also in the position of the crucifixion.



Mary, holding him by both hands, is a real mother, giving her child scope, but at the same time hanging on to him to keep him safe - to prevent him from falling. She is, however distracted, not looking at him directly. I suppose I was influenced by Michelangelo's Madonnas, particularly those in Bruges Cathedral and the Medici chapel in Florence. They too are looking into the distance, lost in thought. Perhaps it is the lot of all mothers – all parents – to realise that the gift of life which they have given to their children is also the gift of death. For Mary it had a greater significance because of what had been foretold to her, and because she would ultimately have to watch her son die, and

hold him after he was removed from the cross. I wanted my sculpture to be both Madonna and Child and Pieta.

The sculpture is intended to have the timeless relevance of depicting the important, if difficult fact, that the way of Christ is the way of the cross.



The difficulty arises because one is forced to ask why it needs to be the way of the cross. The traditional interpretation of the crucifixion is that it is a sacrificial substitute for man's sins; the second Adam paying for the sins of the first. However, as I have said, I do not accept the idea that the Creation story is primarily about man's sin in moving away from God's initial concept of him. Furthermore, I believe that the word "sacrifice" has taken on a significance that diminishes its literal meaning of "to make holy." Because of fairly ubiquitous primitive and superstitious views about the need of placating the gods (of which the story of Abraham's willingness to kill his son has to be a residual example), sacrifice came to mean something which involved death by substitution as a form of retribution, and it therefore became very different from its original meaning, since it is hard to see where holiness can possibly be embraced by such an idea.

The etymological meaning of redemption is "to buy back," and when it is used in the sense of God buying back his errant creation by this kind of sacrifice, it is surely unacceptable, if only because it is unfair. Attempts to skirt around the problem are generally unsatisfactory. I remember, many years ago, listening to a talk about redemption, in which the speaker produced a parable. He said that there was a master who was owed money by his servant, who was unable to pay his debt. The master, because he was both just and merciful, refused to forgo the debt, but gave the servant the money to pay him back. This was supposed to explain the reason for the crucifixion. It seemed to me then, as it seems to me now, to be the most atrocious excuse imaginable for the iniquities of a bureaucratic mind. Redemption has to mean something more significant than this.

As I have said, I see God's act of creation as an act in which the idea becomes reality, and in which freedom from the idea is a necessary part of reality. By parting himself from his creation, God was able to relate to it as something other than himself, creating a bond which would not have existed had they not become separate and had creation not become free. The only word we have in English to describe such a bond, is "love." It is perhaps surprising that in English, with its enormous vocabulary, we have only one word for love, whereas the Greeks had several, defining its different forms. However, although *agape*, or divine love, might seem a better choice of word, there is also

something positive in a definition which is overarching, providing we are careful to avoid the word's frequent devaluation and sentimentalisation. Redemption, within the context of this relationship between God and man remains a "buying back," but one determined by the necessity of that relationship. The incarnation then becomes "vital" in the original sense of that word, as the act of love in which the Creator steps into his creation.

At this point, the crucifixion is not a primitive act of retributive justice by substitution, but a direct manifestation of love and unconditional forgiveness of the type which we saw expressed in Grunewald's altar-piece, in which God participates in the suffering of his creation; or as in Milton's depiction of Adam, accepting suffering and death because love is more important, which is why any worthwhile concept of love needs to be robust. As a consequence, the crucifixion becomes the ultimate symbol of the real presence of God; which is the point at which symbol becomes sacrament, and the abstract the real.

And that, I suppose, is the point which I have reached on my journey. It is a journey on which thoughts and images have entered my mind and formed themselves under my hands unexpectedly. It is a journey on which all of us are bound, for we all know what it means to be "struck by an idea." The idea is not something that we invent of ourselves, nor formulate by calculated design. At its very least, it is something from outside us, which sets us thinking for ourselves. At its best, it is the inspiration for which we can claim no credit.

At that point, we are back in the sphere of the Byzantine icon, where the artist is of no importance in himself; and where the work of art can be seen as an act of prayer. That, of course, is not the end of the issue, for one then asks what exactly prayer is. As we have seen, prayer can mean different things to different people. For Dr. Johnson, it was more easily defined by what it was not, whilst for the artists and poets before him, it could be the expression of a personal relationship. Even that is complicated, for within that relationship, we can invest God with our idea of him, and turn him into an idol, or let prayer become a form of wish-fulfilment, as might perhaps have been the case with Bernini. George Herbert, however, understood prayer's complexity, and in a poem that bridges the centuries in its extraordinary modernity of form, explains it in a way that could only be expressed by someone for whom prayer had absolute reality. It is not a description of prayer, for there is no verb that connects the opening noun, "Prayer", with the rest. Rather, the whole poem is an extended title, which covers prayer in a multitude of forms.

*Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r;
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear;
The six-days world transposing in an hour;
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.*

The final two words are an abstraction, which defines the reality of all relationships, whether personal, artistic or divine.