

It's art for God's sake

This sermon was given at the Thanksgiving Service for the Murals on 2 March 2025

It is good to be here today as we give thanks for the murals in the chancel after they have recently been restored. It is a pleasure to see so many familiar faces here in the congregation. It was good to see the results of the restoration work a fortnight ago when I was at the service of thanksgiving for the life of John Edmonds.

The restoration project showed great ambition and celebrates the sense of glory we have in our faith. One of the joys of being a vicar is the ministry of weddings. I would invite couples to the Vicarage and talk about their plans and the practicalities. I would ask them if they'd seen the inside of Saint Mary's and I would be surprised how few had. So I would take them up to the church, switch on the lights and watch their faces as they appreciated the sense of awe within the building. I would tease them and say, 'do you think this would be OK?' I didn't really need an answer.

The restoration project required patience, money and permissions. There were actions of fixing the gutters, arranging scaffolding, stabilizing the surface of the wall and engaging conservators. This required many people to collaborate, work behind the scenes and there were disruptions to the services. I was honoured to be part of the team taking this forward. Many people were involved but I know that Clem Sutton did much practical research and planning. John Beale was deeply involved in the fund raising. Faith is about many things; worship, Bible, theology, a vision of life grounded in truth and beauty. But it also is about being practical, the life of a community and times of celebration. God is encountered in beauty, skill, exploration and generosity.

Art has familiar expressions. In a child's mind a house has two storeys with four windows and a central door. A tree has a brown trunk and cloud of green on the top. At the much more developed end of art, sculpture can produce human figures that are uncannily true to life. There are classic subjects such as the heart breaking pieta, St. Mary cradling her lifeless son. One of greatest expressions of our civilisation.

Do take time to look at the chancel. There are saints, words of praise, even instruments of torture. Art might not be comfortable. The restored mural includes images of Moses. These give expression to his glorified face which has beams projecting from his forehead. This is a familiar way to express Moses' glorified face after he has been in God's presence. The murals are saying, 'to experience God is to be transformed'.

Art communicates. Art is power. Art can be dangerous. In the Bible there is the commandment not to make graven images, not to have idols because the likeness of God cannot be captured. In the eighth and ninth centuries Byzantine churches in the East removed icons used for devotion. At the Reformation, the Bible was put centre stage and during the Puritanism of the English Civil War - much church art was destroyed. Art was seen as too limited to do justice to God. These sad experiences were a destructive reaction to art.

Alternatively art can be developed. The main story in Christianity has been about understanding the limitations and pushing the boundaries. The Renaissance and the Roman Catholic Counter Reformation saw art flourish in an explosion of creativity to express faith. A powerful dimension of art is to speak fresh truth, to be courageous, to give ambition to life. A true understanding of art knows that its true value is beyond itself.

That sense of fresh truth and transcendence is in the account of the Transfiguration. Jesus has that same glorification described earlier of Moses. But more than the brilliant vision of Jesus, they speak of his departure. The word in the original is 'exodus'. The salvation of the Hebrews through the Red Sea Jesus now applies to himself. His journey to Jerusalem, crucifixion and resurrection usher in God's true salvation. Peter is overwhelmed by the brilliance and misses the meaning. He seeks to hold the experience and misses the challenge.

The art of the first Christian centuries was of a shepherd or a fish. The Cross was not used until the fourth century as it was too real and brutal. But the message that the believers lived by and died by was about Jesus' death and resurrection. They had found and celebrated new life, eternal life and that it is for everyone.

In 2 Corinthians 3.18 Paul says, 'and all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another'. From seeing the majesty of Jesus we find ourselves embraced by the value he gives to human life. Life that is forever rescued from failure and shame and drawn forward to flourish and enjoy eternal life. This is the ambition of art because it is God's ambition.

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