



*Reflections upon
a
Crucified Christ*

The Crucifixion Mosaic
Our Lady Help of Christians Parish
Cowley
by
Fr Kieran Anderson SDB



Welcome

On the 24th May 1967 the Parish Church of Our Lady Help of Christians, Cowley was consecrated to God. The four walls and the altar were anointed with holy oil. This is a sacred space, where God dwells among his people and where the people can encounter the living God. Not only is the building holy, but God's People are also consecrated to Him, because they are anointed with the same holy oil in Baptism, Confirmation and Ordination. Bricks and mortar shelter the 'living stones' who are the Church, the Body of Christ, who gather day by day to offer an endless litany of worship and praise to God.

In 1961, at a cost of £480.15.0d, The Irish Mosaic Company in Roscommon was commissioned to design a contemporary representation of the Crucifixion in mosaic for the new parish church. It was their first English commission. It measures 10 feet high by 6 feet wide. It portrays Jesus, lifted high on the Cross, in the presence of our Blessed Lady, St John the Evangelist and St Mary Magdalene.

We are truly blessed to have such a beautiful work of art in our parish church. As we gaze upon it there are so many different aspects that can become an inspiration for our reflection and our prayer. I hope that the photographs will help you to see something new and fresh in the mosaic and that the texts which accompany them may be useful for your prayers, both at home and during the celebration of the Eucharist in the parish church.

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world.



The hands of the Father

The hands of God the Father are depicted at the very top of the mosaic. The hands point downwards, focusing our attention on Jesus. At the baptism of Jesus and on Mount Tabor the Father's voice was heard to say, 'This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him' (Luke 9:35). At the Crucifixion, there is no voice from Heaven. The silence is deafening. Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' We can identify quite easily with Our Lord's feelings. In the face of great pain and suffering we can sometimes feel that we have been deserted by God. We can doubt our faith. Yet, the mosaic makes a great statement of faith: even in the moment of immense suffering, the Father is there. His hands point to his Beloved Son, recalling the works of the Prophet Isaiah, 'Here is my servant whom I behold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have endowed him with my spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations' (Is 42:1).

The last words of Jesus are a prayer of great faith and trust, 'Father into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk.24:46). The hands of the Father are open in a gesture of welcome as He receives the offering of His Son. The death of Jesus seems so cruel, pointless and futile. Its true meaning and significance cannot be understood until after the Resurrection. 'The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again' (Jn. 10:17). In times of trial, difficulty and suffering our faith brings us to a similar moment: to trust God, to unite ourselves with Jesus and, with all the love the heart can find, to commend ourselves to the Father, who never stops loving us or holding us in His hands.



The nailed hand of Jesus

Throughout his ministry the hands of Jesus were only used to bring healing, peace and blessing. Now they are cruelly fastened to the Cross. When children were brought to Jesus he laid his hands upon them and gave them his blessing (Mk 10:16). With his fingers Jesus smeared a paste upon the eyes of a blind man at Bethsaida and restored his sight (Mk 8:22-26). He placed his fingers in the ears of a deaf man and gave him back his hearing (Mk 8:31-37). For the multitudes gathered upon the hill to listen to him, Jesus took loaves of bread and fish and having offered them to the Father in a prayer of thanks and praise, he broke them and fed every man, woman and child (Mk 8:1-10). When Peter began to sink beneath the waves Jesus puts out his hand at once and holds him (Mt 14:32). The hands of Jesus brought the love of his heart to all those in need.

Christ has no body now, but yours. We reveal the love of Christ not only by the things we say, but by the things we do. During the celebration of the Mass we are asked to share the sign of peace with one another. We offer our hand in friendship and peace, receiving the hand of another with love. When we come to receive Holy Communion we make a throne of our hands to receive the Lord. The Lord entrusts himself into our hands, so that they may be blessed for his service. The hands of every Christian, like the hands of our Saviour, are meant to be open to human need. We all stand in need of God's grace, so that we can respond with generosity and love to those around us. The icon of the crucified hand of Jesus reminds us of the sacrifices we will need to make in our lives so that we can be open to others.



The nailed feet of Jesus

The figure of St Mary Magdalene, kneeling at the foot of the Cross, represents every person who gazes at this icon of the Crucifixion. She spends her life lavishing great love upon Jesus, because her many sins were forgiven (Lk.7:47). It is her hand that is nearest to the body of the Crucified Jesus. On a previous occasion her tears had fallen upon the feet of Jesus and she had wiped them away with her hair. She had covered the feet of Jesus with kisses and anointed them with precious oil (Lk.7:37-38). Now she reached out to touch his nailed feet, one final caress of loving comfort for her Lord.

Her hand is raised upwards in a gesture that speaks of repentance. The blood of Jesus is poured out upon the Cross so that sins might be forgiven. Mary Magdalene knows her need of forgiveness and at the foot of the Cross she begs it from the Lord. She reminds us that we too need to be continually seeking the forgiveness of God. Isaiah prophesied, 'He was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins. On him lies a punishment that brings us peace and through his wounds we are healed' (Is 53:5).

When we love someone we will do everything in our power not to say or do anything that would hurt or offend them. The love we have for Jesus in our heart is the well-spring of sorrow and repentance for our sins. We too lift up our hands and pray: Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy Lord have mercy. We turn to our Lord, who in his sufferings reveals to us that God is full of mercy and compassion, slow to anger, abounding in truth and love (Ps 85:15).



The pierced side of Jesus

'They shall look upon the one whom they have pierced: they will mourn for him as for an only son and weep for him' (Zech. 12:10). When the soldiers came to break the legs of those who were crucified, to hasten their deaths, they found that Jesus was already dead. One of the soldiers pierced the side of Jesus with a lance 'and immediately there came out blood and water' (Jn. 19:33).

The Preface for the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus beautifully expresses the meaning and significance of this detail of the Lord's death and is a rich source of prayer:

Lifted high on the cross Christ gave his life for us, so much did he love us, from his wounded side flowed blood and water, the fountain of sacramental life in the Church. To her open heart the Saviour invites all men and women to draw water in joy from the springs of salvation.

The blood and water symbolize the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism washes away sin. It makes us children of God and members of the Church. It is the gateway to the sacraments and to a grace-filled life. Through Baptism we are joined to Christ forever. The Eucharist is the greatest prayer of the Church. The cross becomes the altar, as we offer to the Father the sacrifice of the Son who saves us. In return, our gifts of bread and wine are changed into the Body and the Blood of Jesus, so that we might be nourished and live.



The Blessed Virgin Mary

The Church venerates with particular devotion the humble woman of Nazareth, who listened to the work of God and put it into practice. She is the model of Christian discipleship. With all the People of Israel she waited in hope for the coming of the Messiah. She longed for God in her heart ever before she carried him in her womb. At the message of the Angel Gabriel she opened herself to the gracious invitation of God to bear his Son and to bring him to life. 'I am the handmaid of the Lord let what you have said be done to me' (Lk.1:38). The Christian disciple must be willing to listen attentively to the voice of God speaking through the events of the day and having heard the voice of the Beloved, to put into action the good inspirations that grace the heart and mind.

May is also the Mother of the Church. She gave birth to Jesus Christ, who founded the Church on the apostles; the Body of Christ, of which He is the Head. She remains resolute in her motherly concern for her Son, even to the point of standing at the foot of the Cross, suffering in her own heart the sufferings of her Son. From the Cross, Jesus entrusts his mother to St John, 'This is your mother' (Jn. 19:27). Mary becomes the spiritual mother of all the faithful through every age and generation. Gathered body and soul in the happiness of Heaven, Mary continues to cherish the Church with a motherly heart and a motherly love. She is venerated as Mary, Help of Christians, because she cares for all who are disciples of her Son. She supports us by her prayers in our pilgrimage of faith and life until we too reach Heaven.



The prayerful hands of Mary

Prayer is essential if we are to deepen our life with God. Prayer is the key that opens the morning and closes the night. Throughout the Day we are invited to raise our hearts and minds to God in prayer.

How should we pray? There are the traditional prayers that we learned in our childhood. These well-known words and phrases unite us with the whole Church in prayer. Talking to God in our own words is also prayer. Silence can be prayer too. The Mass is the greatest prayer we can offer. Prayer is a moment when my heart can speak to the heart of God and when I can let my heart be touched by God's love.

Mary's hands are joined in prayer, gently resting upon her heart. We can easily imagine her great pain and anguish as she stands at the foot of the Cross. Unable to do anything to ease the suffering of her Son, Mary joins their suffering together and in prayer offers it to the Father. Her prayer speaks of her faith and trust in God. When we experience suffering, anxiety, great crisis and when we feel powerless, our prayer before God is one of intercession and supplication: 'O God come to my aid. O Lord make haste to help me.' We also rely upon the prayers of Our Blessed Lady and of the saints: 'Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now and the hour of our death.'

In these hands of such a loving mother I imagine all the people of the parish and myself, with all our many dreams worries and sufferings. There is no need to worry or to be afraid, because we are enfolded in loving prayer.



St John the Evangelist

The apostles ran away from Calvary in fear, abandoning the Lord all except John. The icon portrays him with the palm of his hand facing forward testifying to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and inviting us to believe that 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him may not be lost, but may have eternal life' (Jn.3:16).

John keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus. This Beloved Disciple teaches us, the present day disciples of Christ, something vital and important. We live in a world that is filled with so many distractions and contradictory voices baying for our attention. If we can keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and listen to his voice then there will be nothing that can take away our peace. Every day we have to find a little bit of time to read the Gospels, so that we can learn to imitate the actions of Jesus and make the words of Jesus our own. The Christian disciple must come to have the same heart and mind as Christ, the Lord and Master. It is St John who recalls Jesus saying, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' (Jn.14:6).

The presence of this youthful apostle in the icon is a strong reminder to us that the young are precious to the Lord. We have a responsibility to help the young discover the great joy of knowing Christ and serving Him. In their enthusiasm and idealism they help us to rediscover a youthful Christ, who is passionate about life. Jesus speaks to us all when he says, 'I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full' (Jn.10:10).



The look of love

The rich young man asked Jesus the question, 'Good master, what, must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Mk 10:17). This is an important question for anyone who is serious about life and its meaning. The answer to this question will shape the thoughts, words and actions of the disciple. The young man leaves Jesus somewhat disappointed. He has let his whole life be guided by living the commandments, but because of his great wealth, he cannot find the inner freedom to distribute his riches to the poor and needy and follow Jesus. The Lord 'looked steadily at him and loved him' (Mk 10:21). The Lord looks with love upon us. He sees into the very fabric of our being, knowing our hopes, dreams, struggles and sorrows. He loves us without conditions. It is his love for us that is the source of all compassion, forgiveness and healing.

The heart of the disciple whispers 'seek his face' 'It is your face, O Lord that I seek hide not your face' (Ps 27:8). The face of Christ is disfigured by violence and crowned with thorns. Can we see the face of Christ in the lives of those who will suffer violence, oppression, exile, poverty, hunger, homelessness and illness? Whatever response we can make as individuals and as a parish community to such suffering and injustice is to respond to the Lord in the 'least of these brothers or sisters of mine' (Mt 25:40). We are called to be contemplatives in action, so that every day our love of God is shown in a practical way in the love we have for our neighbour. Our eyes may well be raised to Heaven, but our feet are firmly planted on the ground!



Though many we are one

A single tile does not create a mosaic. It is made up of thousands of small tiles. No two tiles are the same. Each one is shaped differently, or has a slightly different textured surface. Nor is each tile perfect. Some of the tiles are chipped or pitted with small holes. Together they make up the hues of colour and give shape to the figures. They all blend together to create the full picture.

The mosaic tiles can be regarded as a metaphor for the Church. The Church is made up of many people and yet each person carries something of the Church within himself or herself. Each person is unique and is loved individually by God. The Church strives to be a community of saints, but it is also a community of sinners. Every baptized person is called to be holy, as God is holy. Yet, the struggle with sin touches all the members of the Church. It is through the ministry of the Church that we seek forgiveness, absolution and reconciliation. We remember the words of the Lord, 'I have come not to call the virtuous, but sinners' (Lk.5:32). We are invited to live in God's love by God's grace. Though we are many, we discover that we are one, because 'there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Eph. 4:5).

The Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus, is the sign of unity. It is Holy Communion: communion with God and with his Church. Nourished by his spiritual food we pray that we may become one body, one spirit in Christ. The Lord depends upon each one of us to take the gift of love we have received at Mass into the world. Individually and as a parish we are called to be heralds of the Gospel.



Through Mary to Jesus

At the foot of the Cross stands Mary, the Mother of Jesus. When she was invited by the Angel Gabriel to conceive and give birth to the Word of God she could not possibly have imagined that one day she would have to bear the pain of seeing him die. Yet, Simeon had prophesied as much when the child was presented in the Temple, 'You see this child: he is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected-and a sword will pierce your own soul too' (Lk.2:35).

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Mary and the apostles 'joined in continuous prayer' in the Upper Room, where they received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Mary, present at the death of the Lord is also present at the birth of the Church.

From time to time, the shadow of the Cross will fall across the shoulders of those who seek to follow Christ. There will also be moments of great joy, consolation and strength in following Jesus. We journey to the Lord accompanied by Mary, inspired by the example of her great faith and strengthened by her prayers. She is given to us a tender Mother and a reliable Helper.

The disciple is not greater than the Master. The role of Mary, the perfect disciple of Christ, is to lead us to Christ. She helps us to know Him. Only by knowing Him can we grow in love for Him and our love for Him moves us to live for Him and serve Him. Through Mary to Jesus. Amen.