

Compline Address
Wednesday in Holy Week 13 April 2022
Man of Sorrows

Isaiah 53. 1-6

A couple of weeks ago I was very glad to be celebrating the Eucharist in Prince Arthur's Chantry Chapel on the 520th anniversary of his death. I had been looking forward to this for many weeks; the chantry chapel is for me, like many of you, a particularly beautiful space within the cathedral, and as it is not used as regularly as other chapels, this was a poignant and beautiful celebration. It would sound slightly pompous to say I felt connected with those chantry priests who before the reformation would say mass for the soul of the deceased, but I was reminded, once again, of the timelessness of the eucharist where we join with angels, archangels, and the whole company of heaven.

However there was an added moment of wonder and a deeply moving connection when, during the eucharistic prayer, raising my head, my eyes fell directly upon the central image of the reredos. Flanked by images of St Anthony, St Edmund, Edward the Confessor, and St George, is a central, thin niche containing the much-damaged image of Christ, the Man of Sorrows. It is the only painted figure within the chapel and much of the colouring survives. I have often looked at this reredos but confess that its damaged state, and the story of that damage, combined with the historical imagination which Prince Arthur inspires, meant that I had not given much thought to this figure of the suffering Christ as a devotional image.

The panel shows a now headless and armless statue of Christ,



standing and wearing a cloak with a brooch which was once gilded. *The cloak is drawn aside to reveal his bloody wounds and the drapery is held up by two angels flying down from above. It is quite possible that the angels held in their other hand instruments of the passion.* It is an image found in some other tombs and chantry chapels but, on the whole, very rare in England and it is well worth spending time before it, even in its damaged state. It is an image which is purposefully devotional. Unlike other depictions of Christ which illustrate actual events referenced in the Bible, this is a purely devotional image showing him as a symbol of sacrifice.

This placing of the Man of Sorrows directly above the place where the priest celebrates the eucharist has an interesting similarity with an image in a chantry chapel in Exeter Cathedral. There a panel in the reredos – similarly disfigured and damaged – shows the Mass of St Gregory. *A mass is depicted taking place at an altar with a chalice centrally placed, behind which and slightly above is the Man of Sorrows, represented as a half-length Christ in front of the crucifix and accompanied by symbols of the passion.* The placing of the image at Exeter and our version here at Worcester were designed to demonstrate the eucharistic reality of Christ's passion, a devotional device underlining the real presence of Christ.

As we gather in Holy Week we shall contemplate these two aspects of the Man of Sorrows image very deeply. Tomorrow as we recall the institution of the Eucharist we shall deepen our belief in the great sacrament of Christ's body and blood, and on Good Friday as we come forward to venerate the cross on which he died, Christ's wounds will be at the forefront of our minds, and we shall sing his praise in familiar words:

See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down;
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

But to close I wish to return to my earlier comment that my previous encounters with this image have been less devotional and more about its appearance and history. It is hard to look at it without calling to mind the tumultuous years of the reformation and the civil war, events which left lasting marks on this cathedral. As to when this sculpture was defaced we cannot be sure, but records tell us that one Dean in particular and later a Bishop were

ardent iconoclasts. What we see now transports us to a time of fervent (and at times riotous) division. Not being a man of such fervour or zeal myself, I often wonder how anyone might have been able to wilfully, intentionally, and passionately take a chisel or axe to an image of Our Lord? Of course I view all this through my modern and liberal eyes, and from the relatively safety of a pluralist society, but I daresay I am not alone in struggling to picture myself capable of such violent destruction.

We must assume that those responsible – whether the lawmakers or the law enforcers – had the greatest respect for Christ himself and that their wrath was aimed solely at what they saw as idolatry. But the words of Isaiah which we heard earlier perhaps leave us with a contemporary meditation on the Man of Sorrows.

As we look at the mutilated image before us we hear the prophet's words in a new way:

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities.

The destruction of a stone image can be easily rationalised by us all, even if we are aghast at the cultural loss it represents. But are we as easily offended by the destruction of Christ's image in others?

How easily we take the weapons of hatred to those in whom we choose not to see the image of Christ. How easily we despise and reject the presence of God in those who have no form or majesty that we should look at them. How readily we wound the earth with our transgressions, crushing creation with our iniquities.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way.

We may no longer take an axe to a statue, but we continue to take an axe to those in the image of God. We see Christ' body mutilated, scarred and defaced when we see the injustices of poverty, war, and discrimination.

The scars which this cathedral bears from times past are now devotional items in themselves. They show us the ongoing suffering of Christ's body, the Church. The ongoing trials of a wounded world. We gaze on this image, its past and present, as a call to renewal for reconciliation and dignity. It is in the Eucharist which we celebrate tomorrow evening that Christ offers his broken body and it is in the Cross on Good Friday that we receive healing and forgiveness.

The wounds of the Man of Sorrows are displayed in the suffering of our brothers and sisters today. We are the Body of Christ and our wounds are those of a wounded world. It is Christ alone who heals us, and we come to the Cross, as we come to the Eucharist, confident of his victory.

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Description and history of the chantry chapel reredos taken from
GUNN, S & MONCKTON, L (Eds) Arthur Tudor Prince of Wales Boydell Press
(2009)

Verse from When I survey the wondrous cross, Author: Isaac Watts (1707)