LECTURE FROM COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

SPEAKER  Michael Sadgrove
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I am very glad to be back in Coventry in this year when the Diocese celebrates its centenary, and with it, this Cathedral in its two incarnations. We came to Coventry in 1987, this building’s silver jubilee year. In eight years here, I learned most of what I know about liturgy and music which were my main brief as Precentor. But as I look back, I realise that what influenced me most was this building itself, and the community whose place it was and is. I don’t only mean in the sense of understanding what cathedral ministry means, and thereby setting the course of the rest of my working life as a dean in two other cathedrals. I mean the experience of being a worshipper here, a disciple, a praying human being for whom this place proved to be extraordinarily formative.

My book on the Tapestry, A Picture of Faith, was published in 1995, the year we left Coventry. But I wrote it earlier than that, during a period of sabbatical leave in, I think, 1991. It was the only book I have ever written in longhand. Maybe handwriting a text makes a difference. You feel in intimate contact with the words as they take shape on paper. I wonder whether this first essay in producing something to last wasn’t the best of me, because of the slowness of writing in your own hand. Everything is weighed and pondered when you are not in a rush as you so often are on a computer or tablet.

I had not looked at it for a quarter of a century until I was invited to give this lecture. But I have revisited the Tapestry itself, times without number. When I left Coventry, I bought a remaindered poster of it for one pound in the Cathedral shop and had it framed. It has hung in my study ever since. It’s not the same as seeing it in the flesh, but it’s the next best thing. But when I have come back here, I always feel that it greets me like an old friend. As I say in the book, I feel recognised by it, known, embraced. It will always be for me a profound metaphor of being loved.

That’s partly the good recognition you often have when you find yourself back in a place where you have flourished. But it’s more than that. I think it’s the specific part the Tapestry played in my human, spiritual and theological formation in the years I was here. Writing the book was only a final stage of a process in which the Tapestry worked on me long before I worked on it.

I first came here in 1962, not long after the consecration. My parents thought we should drive up the newly opened M1 from London and see the cathedral, this emblem of a post-war Britain rising from the ashes. I was twelve. I have never forgotten that day. Two things stand out in my memory of that sunny day: the jet-black marble floor in which you could see yourself reflected; and the Tapestry, whose golds and greens cast an unforgettable glow over the entire building, and whose figure of Christ in Majesty laid down a way of contemplating the divine that I have returned to ever since.

For me it was life-changing. I don’t say that it was my very first religious experience. But I think Coventry gave me my first explicit glimmerings of a faith that I knew I did not yet have but began to crave. (That happened not long afterwards at school as I sang the top line in Bach’s St John Passion. It sowed the seeds of my next book, The Eight Words of Jesus which was a reflection on the Passion Narrative in the Fourth Gospel; but it had to wait until Durham to see the light of day.) So you can see why, when I came here twenty five years later to work, it already felt like a homecoming.

In my time, the daily prayer of the Cathedral always took place within sight of the Tapestry. In the mornings, and when evensong was sung of course, it would be celebrated in the quire. When evening prayer was said, it would take place in the Lady Chapel. This was true of both Sunday eucharists too, the early service in the Lady Chapel and the sung eucharist at the high altar. When I said that most of the week we worshipped “in sight of the Tapestry”, I don’t just mean our sight of it. I also mean its sight of us. For Christ in Majesty is such a powerful figure that he presides
not only over the Tapestry but over the entire Cathedral as Basil Spence had intended. The Tapestry dominates everything. That cannot but powerfully configure the spirituality of the cathedral and everyone who worships there.

*A Picture of Faith* was my attempt to explore how it was configuring me. It was never meant to be an art monograph, though I read a lot about Graham Sutherland as I researched it. I was also clear that I was not writing a work of formal theology, though theology came into every page. As I put it in the book, I wanted to offer a modest piece of prayed theology illuminated by the insights of poets and painters, writers, musicians and spiritual guides down the ages. What I set out to do was to set out a personal reading of the Tapestry as it had encountered me as a human being endeavouring to make sense of life, as an explorer of the spirit as I say in the preface. I did not want to speak for anyone else, only myself. Hence the confessional tone using the first person singular throughout.

When the book was published, some people told me they didn’t see all of the Tapestry’s symbolism in the same way as I did. And why not? I’d learned something about stained glass in Salisbury when the Prisoners of Conscience east window was being installed in the late 1970s. Gabriel Loire, the artist in Chartres, spoke about tolérance. He meant the capacity of art to be read in different ways because it has depth and texture and layers of meaning. Tolérance, he said, is about an attitude of openness and generosity in the way we read art, texts, people. It stimulates our curiosity, makes us want to ask questions. This became an important idea for me because it allowed the imagination to roam, take risks with the meanings that lay in written texts (the Bible, literature and poetry), architecture like this Cathedral, and above all at that time, the Tapestry.

Indeed, one aspect of the design of this Cathedral had already got me into trouble. When the old Cathedral Pitkin Guide went out of print. John Petty asked me to write a new one, not to revise the old but to create an entirely new book. He said: don’t just describe. Interpret how you think this great church speaks about Christianity. That’s the real point, isn’t it: how to explore the architecture and the design of the furnishings as a witness to the gospel. Today we would speak about the missional dimension of the Cathedral. There’s no better way to learn about your church, not simply as heritage or architecture but as the home of a worshipping community, a place of lived spiritual experience, a building that makes a statement about this church’s mission.

Here’s what I wrote about this quire we are sitting in. “The canopies above the canons’ stalls suggest thorns, or birds in flight.” That simple sentence greatly upset one member of the Cathedral community. He said: “Provost Williams taught us that the quire was an avenue of thorns leading up to the high altar. It’s about death and resurrection. Flying birds don’t come into it.” Before long, other people were being told that the Precentor was subverting the Cathedral’s “message”. He was determined to fall out with me about it, I’m afraid. I was sorry about that. I did not think that the canopies, beautiful as they are, were worth the upset.

But I was adamant that the way we read art and architecture is permissive not univocal. There can never be a single authorised reading of anything, whatever the artist intended (if we can ever know). Yes, Spence did speak about an avenue of thorns. But I doubt he would have excluded other images that the canopies suggested. When I showed his son-in-law and architect Anthony Blee the draft text of my guidebook for his comment, he was happy with what I had said about birds in flight signalling transcendence, which indeed he linked to the flame above the Dean’s stall symbolising the Holy Spirit and to the descent of the Dove in at the top of the Tapestry. The science of hermeneutics is dedicated to understanding how readings of texts are always multivocal – and buildings, art, human beings and communities are all “texts” for those purposes. What I was trying to do was to be inclusive in my reading rather than exclusive. As a spiritual and moral principle, I believe that inclusion is always better than exclusion. I’ll come back to that point towards the end.

Let’s turn to the Tapestry itself for another example of this. Look at what is going on just outside the right-hand edge of the mandorla between St John’s eagle above and St Mark’s lion below. You can see St Michael the Archangel reaching down to a beaked creature who is facing away from Christ. This is Graham Sutherland’s depiction of Satan being thrown out of heaven, according to the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation. But as I pondered this image I was struck how different it is from the more famous depiction of the same event at the Cathedral’s entrance. There, Jacob Epstein’s great sculpture has the archangel treading down the adversary in a decisive act of triumph.
over evil. The Tapestry seems more ambiguous. Michael could as easily be reaching down to stop Satan from falling out of heaven as pushing him in a final coup de grace.

This ambivalence seemed to me to be important. Is the Tapestry saying that there is an eternal chasm between good and evil, and consequently a permanent banishment of the wicked to hell? Or is there a constant work of redemption taking place in the cosmos that will one day lead to the healing of all that is now separated, distorted, fractured? In the earliest centuries of the Christian era, theologians like Origen said that as long as a soul remains in hell, Christ remains on the cross. At the time when Sutherland was designing the Tapestry, the writings of the Catholic priest Teilhard de Chardin were highly influential. Influenced by the universalism of Origen and by Darwinian evolutionary theory, he envisaged a divine work of convergence towards the unity of creation. He spoke of it as the “Omega Point”. It’s interesting to conjecture whether Teilhard’s theology was an influence on the design. As far as St Michael and the devil are concerned, Sutherland doesn’t say in his book on the Tapestry what he intended. And even if he had, that would not constrain our own reading of it. All artists and writers speak beyond what they think or intend. Sutherland only says that by including it, he wanted to acknowledge the dedication of the Cathedral to St Michael and at the same time create a degree of asymmetry that he believed the Tapestry needed.

I went outside many times to study the Jacob Epstein sculpture and how he depicts the victorious St Michael. It’s often been observed that his face, far from wearing the conventional demeanour of a victor, is remarkably quiescent, almost subdued. I think commentators are right to construe this as compassion; not that Michael hasn’t defeated evil, but that in defeat are the seeds of a new beginning, which explains why Satan is looking up at the victor who stands guard over him, not defiantly but entertaining the hope that redemption, even for him, is not an impossible idea. If this is right, then there is a coherence between the two St Michaels, outside and in, and that seems to me to fit precisely into the message of global, indeed cosmic, reconciliation that this Cathedral has always proclaimed to the world. Who’d have thought that a detail on the Tapestry could have such far-reaching theological consequences?

I think this insight was the key to unlocking my own reading of the Tapestry. When I first thought of writing about it, I imagined it would be a kind of descriptive essay. There’s still room for that project, understanding the Tapestry’s place in the design of the Cathedral, in art-history, as a landmark in textile creation, and as a theological statement in the tradition of Christian iconography. The splendid Sutherland exhibition you are enjoying in this Cathedral demonstrates the stature of a great artist whose reputation, I think, has been steadily growing since his lifetime. Ben Quash who has already lectured here could be the person to write it. But what I was finding as I pondered the Tapestry was that it was drawing me into it and inviting me to find my personal place within its rich, complex symbolism that about God, the universe and everything. Meanings were what I was interested in, not fixed, static codes that imperiously ordered me to understand it this way, but dynamic, fluid meanings that invited me to make a personal spiritual journey, become curious, explore, discover, discern.

So I tried to put myself inside the Tapestry and learn. Let’s consider the human figure standing between the feet of Jesus because, very thoughtfully, Sutherland has already placed someone, anyone, you, me, every child of humanity, on the Tapestry. I admit I was startled to re-read what I’d written about this. Having made the point that the figure is not, in fact, life-sized, though you often hear it said, I go on:

If I concentrate on what I see in that square of tapestry and for the time being forget about the rest, I see an eloquent picture of my existence. I stand alone in a dark place. Above me is a great swirl of – I know not what; it simply overwhelms the place where I am, like some huge, lowering storm cloud. On either side of me are feet and legs, rearing up to be lost in the darkness above. I am not to know whose they are. For all I know, they may as well be the wreckage of some colossal monument, like Shelley’s “two vast and trunkless legs of stone” with their chilling motto: “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”

The word that comes to mind as I ponder the human being is lostness: lost in relation to the scale of his (sic) immense surroundings, lost in a deeper, more existential sense in the face of life’s dilemmas. In one way this man can look exceedingly forlorn. I come back to Dante in his dark wood: ready for his journey, yet not knowing in which direction to go. I see myself in that diminutive human figure at the times of my life when I have felt most perplexed, crushed
almost by the demands, dilemmas and uncertainties of being alive and human. At such times it is as if I am stripped of all the normal securities with which I protect myself from too much reality. I am alone and naked in the dark, like the figure on the Tapestry. Like Job, I hear a voice summoning me to stand up, like a man, and be questioned. Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

(That passage illustrates the stream-of-consciousness style in which I wrote. It may not be to everyone’s taste, but it illustrates the interest in psychotherapy that was awakening in me at the time my wife Jenny was beginning a psychoanalytic training. I believed that in the spirit of Now Voyager! the only book worth writing was an honest one in which I was not going to be afraid of the first-person singular.)

The chapter goes on to explore the hiddenness of God, the endlessly fascinating story in Genesis of Jacob wrestling with the angel, the via negativa in Christian spirituality exemplified by spiritual guides like Meister Eckhart, the anonymous fourteenth century book The Cloud of Unknowing and some of the poetry of R. S. Thomas. What does it mean to speak of the absence of God as a spiritual reality? How do we speak about God without resorting to analogies? How we find God in the dark places of life? It’s important you know that this comes near the end of the book. So it is set in the context of what we’ve come to learn about Christ in glory crucified and risen, about the grace and truth of God our Creator and Redeemer, about the four living creatures as symbols of the evangelists, the bringers of good news. And although I conceived this chapter as necessarily about the shadow side of life, it’s important that I also quote the ending.

The darkness that swallowed up Christ on the mountain of transfiguration still contains him and shines because of him. It becomes the shekinah, the cloud of glory. In the absence is a profound presence. And as I pierce through to that presence, I find out that its nature and its name is love.

The tapestry beautifully expresses this paradox. For the man’s darkness is none other than the shadow of the great Christ above him. The fearful cloud over his head is the very skirt of Christ. On each side are the feet of Christ, strong, trustworthy. The man may not know it, but he is “wholly within love”. I see myself in him now in a new way: erect, noble, dignified in this new status as child of God. He is as I know myself to be, “wholly within love”, held firm, profoundly safe… “So the darkness shall be the light and the stillness the dancing”…In this dark yet good place I can be still; and discover that I am dancing in the sunshine.

Where did this come from, this chapter that I recall at the time felt quite tough to write? I see I referenced Biblical texts like Genesis, the Psalms, Job and the passion narrative. But I can also see my own mid-life in it, for our late-thirties and early forties can be a highly significant, sometimes fraught, time in our personal development. For me, opening up a conversation with the Tapestry in this way, being inspired by it, but daring to question it too, marked an important step in my own theological and spiritual formation. Maybe we can only speak about darkness and pain when we have lived long enough to reflect on it. Life has to be lived forwards but understood backwards. At all events, this chapter, and the one about the crucifixion tableau, emerge from a growing conviction that if religion has nothing to say about suffering, then it has nothing to say. To me, Christ in Glory, the human figure at his feet, and the crucified man on the cross below are all about the same fundamental theme of the Christian gospel, light and dark, suffering and transfiguration, death and resurrection inseparably held together. Glory can only speak to us when we trust that it knows about pain – the world’s pain, our collective human pain, our pain as individual people before God, flesh and blood women, children, men. Which is to say that the Tapestry is an icon of the Incarnation because its central truth is that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”.

That word icon is important. It was always central to how I approached the Tapestry, and there’s a whole chapter devoted to this in the first part of the book. I’ve said I recognised that I was not describing the Tapestry so much as entering into its meanings. My meditation felt closer to poetry than prose, more imaginative writing rather than descriptive analytical prose. The metaphor of the icon was obvious. It’s a metaphor, because technically the Tapestry isn’t an icon in the strict sense of having been “written” by an iconographer according to the rules of the Orthodox Church and the stylistic and colour conventions of its iconographers. It was not envisaged that it would function directly in the Cathedral’s ceremonial, be bowed towards as a conscious liturgical action, censed in the liturgy, have candles lit in front of it and so on.
Yet in a more general sense, icon meaning an image is precisely how the Tapestry functions for this Cathedral community at prayer. No-one calls it a picture – and if I have one regret about my book, it’s the title. In one way, A Picture of Faith – does accurately suggest exploring faith: “a meditation on the imagery of Christ in glory” is precisely what it is. But using the word picture is bound to support the idea my Icon chapter is meant to resist. We come in, we notice the Tapestry, so we look at it. But “at it” maintains the distance between subject and object, observer and observed. On the contrary, the point of an icon is to be drawn into it, know your place within its world through active attention, contemplation, the exercise of the spiritual imagination. I wanted to promote the Tapestry as a spiritual icon, functioning in worship and prayer in the same kind of way as an Orthodox icon.

Some of you will recognise this approach. I wasn’t using the language of Ignatian prayer in those days, but I now see that the book intuited the methods of the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius of Loyola was a wounded soldier who gave his life to being a pilgrim and missioner, a “knight-companion” in the service of Jesus Christ. For him immersion in the person of Christ, and deep reflection on his own experience led to a new understanding of faith and in the light of it, how to make good moral choices. He believed that we need to grasp how Jesus’ life, death and resurrection shape the whole of life. He said that two powers need to be brought into play if we are to encounter him: imagination and love. Imagination means the willingness to enter the world of the other, in this case God as we know him in Jesus. And love is both the fountainhead and fruit of all imaginative prayer and right action. The God who sent his Son into the world as a sign of love, now invites us to find him and love him in Christ, in the scriptures, in the church and in all creation. So imagination is the handmaid of spirituality because it enables us to enter more fully into our life in Christ, into God’s world, our neighbour’s worlds, our own inner worlds.

If I were writing the book today, I would include more of these insights about how we might come before the Tapestry and learn to pray and work in its presence. But I think I was reaching out for them, because the big question the Tapestry put to me was always: how does Christ in Glory change things? How does he transform our lives? How does he speak truth to the Church? How does he energize us to play our part in the work of reconciliation and mission? How does he calibrate our notions of justice and ethics? How does he hold out hope for the world? To discover how a visual image can, with the exercise of imagination and love, help us to probe these great questions is, I now realise, a basically Ignatian approach, however rudimentary and intuitive it was at the time.

The point is to shine a light on our ordinary days so that they are transfigured. Illumination is, as we know, a step on the mystical path of prayer, the spiritual journey documented by St John of the Cross in, for instance, The Dark Night of the Soul. Illumination means being lit up by the grace and truth of God as we contemplate him. Again, this is not an escape from the complexities of life but a fuller way of understanding it and committing ourselves to it in a spiritually intelligent or “enlightened” way. Through it, fantasy and illusion is banished and we become aware in a more profound way of the presence of God in our ordinary human experience and in the world in which we follow Jesus.

It always struck me how powerfully light functions in the Tapestry: the brilliance of the sunburst that emanates out of the presence of the Eternal One at the top; the golden bands of light that both stabilise the Tapestry and travel across it energising, electrifying its surface; St Michael and the four living creatures lit up as holy presences, and of course the majestic figure of Christ himself, transfigured in brilliant white, illuminated as if from within, from which all the other light in the Tapestry is derived. But all this would only work for the spiritual imagination, I think, if there were places where light is dimmed and colour muted, as it is around the figure of the human being, and the crucifixion below. The spiritual task, as both Ignatius and John of the Cross understand it, is to recognise how these realities of light and shadow, what the artists call chiaroscuro, play off one another, how we learn to find God in darkness as well as light.

I want to mention one more aspect of the Tapestry. It comes out of an abrasive encounter I once had in the nave with Professor Daphne Hampson, a distinguished feminist theologian, who was visiting the Cathedral. She stabbed a finger towards the Tapestry and asked how we in the Cathedral could live with that image of unreconstructed masculinity. My response came down to two things. The first was that the work had to be judged by the criteria of the 1950s, not by those of the 1990s. That’s a basic hermeneutical principle: we can argue with a work of art, even an icon, so long as we respect it as a different voice from our own, speaking to us out of its own age and context that
are not ours. That’s fundamental to the way we have to read scripture, a matter of huge relevance to the church today as we grapple with matters like same-sex marriage, for example.

But I also saw, in the Tapestry itself, a clue about how to glimpse a less gendered, more inclusive approach. It’s true that the figure of Christ, and of the human being below, are both unambiguously male. But what about Christ’s posture and the way the priest’s robe arranges itself around the body? Sutherland says of his portrayal of Christ: “I wanted the figure to be real, yet not real. I wanted it to be something slightly ambiguous: a human form, but with overtones of a nature form” (31). Ambiguous! The artist’s own licence to practise tolerance! But doesn’t it go with inclusive, offering at least a hint of the female form to modify the traditionally male depiction of Jesus? I would now certainly explore how this merest hint opens the door to fully inclusive readings of Christian faith where difference is welcomed and celebrated, whether of gender, social class, ethnicity, sexuality or politics. I wrote the book at the time we were preparing to ordain women to the priesthood. I quoted the saying of St Paul in Galatians: “In Christ there is no male or female, Jew or Gentile, bond or free, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” I would now make much more of this, because I believe that the church’s reluctance to act on it in relation to, for example, equal marriage, is not just unfortunate but wrong.

You may say that this is stretching interpretation too far. I reply that this is precisely the function of the Tapestry – to stretch our horizons and challenge us to think again about our assumptions. If I’m guilty of a degree of deconstruction, it is only so that I can understand it in a more profound way. Yes, like any text of literature and poetry, like any work of art, it is a “given”. We have to contemplate it, negotiate its tight corners, interrogate it while it puts its questions to us. But I want to end by saying that these are basic to a healthy theological and spiritual mentality. Those biblical texts I mentioned earlier, Genesis, Job, the lament Psalms, Jesus in Gethsemane, all seem to say: arguing with God does not devalue reverence or cheapen piety. On the contrary. The more we love God, the more we confront him not as a remote disengaged deity but as a living presence who is among and within us as our contemporary.

This is how I see the Tapestry. It tells me that Christ, majestic in his glory is not far from any of us – nearer to us than our own souls. He wants us to feel after him and find him, for he has given himself to us in undying love. The Tapestry is about Christ in Glory. But it’s also about us, as we are now, and as we hope one day to become. Augustine says of the eucharist that it is the mystery of ourselves that is upon the altar. It’s the mystery of ourselves that we see on the Tapestry, held and embraced within the mystery of God and his redemptive love. That’s the clue to reading it, I believe, not only as a beautiful work of art but as an icon of all that is central to our Christian faith and human life.