

Sermon by Revd John Hayward - 'Christ Bearing His Cross' by Van Dyck
Passion Sunday 9.30am

Introduction

On this Passion Sunday as the Church bids us to reflect on the suffering of Christ, let us further explore what lies at the heart of Christian theology, by reference to the painting in the tower behind you, a copy of Van Dyck's "**Christ Bearing His Cross**", the original of which hangs in a medieval church in Antwerp.

(Photo 1)

800 yrs ago this year, the Dominican monastic Order of preachers was founded in Spain, and in 1276 they went to Antwerp, now in Belgium and built

(Photo 2)

St Paul's church near the river Scheldt. 300 years later following the Reformation, in 1585, they built a larger church, with elevated floor to avoid river flooding and created an imposing late - gothic style Church,

(Photo 3)

which would later contain a baroque interior giving expression to the Roman Catholic resurgent 'push' of the Counter Reformation.

While, back home, Queen Elizabeth I manoeuvred to retain her throne, the all powerful Spanish rulers who had sacked Antwerp twice, cut off all trade with England, prepared to invade our shores, from their base in Flanders. Just a decade after all that turmoil, Anthony Van Dyck was born - his father a cloth merchant whose rich customers were among his first patrons. Van Dyck's later skill, painting exquisite clothes, certainly no accident! (as in his famous painting of King Charles I on horseback dominating the Dining room of Highclere Castle of Downton Abbey fame.) The Van Dyck family was devout Catholic, and Anthony became a pupil of the great Flemish artist Peter Rubens, who claimed he was '*the best of my pupils*'. He absorbed his teacher's techniques and preference for the grand scale while already developing his own distinctive style from an early age.

It was when he was just 17 yrs old, in 1617, that St Paul's Church in Antwerp commissioned 11 leading local

(photo 4).

artists to paint a series of 15 masterpieces to adorn the entire length of the north aisle; and at that young age, VanDyck was one of them. His first public commission. Such high esteem was he held in that Van Dyck received the same fee as did Rubens for his work!

The painting we have in our tower is a copy of this original, painted precisely by whom we cannot say, but possibly by another of Rubens' pupils. Our copy has hung here since at least 1792, though no records reveal when, or by whom, it was presumably given. Originally it hung on the north wall of the nave but once the arcades were opened up to build the north aisle, moved to its present position in the tower, which atmospheric conditions have done it no favours.

(Photo 5)

Once the Counter Reformation was well under way, the Dominican's used their artistic patronage to give expression to their interpretation of the Christian Faith in a truly impressive way. In an age when theological debate made holding certain beliefs sometimes a matter of life and death, not just the occasion of changing where you worshipped, the battle between the sense of good and evil was as polarized as ever it would be. And in this spiritual battle, having a ready and accessible armoury of prayer at your disposal was essential and so the series of 15 paintings were commissioned as a visual aid to teaching about the dramatic events of Christ's life of salvation and how his Mother, Mary, witnessed so many of them.

The paintings depict 13 mysteries in the life of Christ himself and a further 2 of his Mother Mary, as taught by Roman Catholicism. I trust that whether you accept the doctrines of the last 2, namely the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin Mary or not, you will accept the preceding 13 Biblical mysteries, all being at the heart of Christian theology for **all** Christians and worth our serious attention. The paintings were an aid to praying the rosary. Its practise, repeating a series of prayers and chants has tended to promote itself as primarily a devotion to Mary but the intended purpose of

repeated chants was designed to free one's mind from thinking about the prayer words and instead to ponder, gazing on art to assist, and enter-into the divine mysteries of which there are 15.

For those mathematically minded, saying 10 hail Mary's for each of the 15 mysteries, brought you to the total number of the psalms, all of which, in the old monastic tradition, were said every day.

(photo 6)

The Mysteries are divided into 3 sections: Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious. And the colour pigments in the paintings reflect these different moods. Van Dyck's offering is of course in the Sorrowful section,

(photo 7)

just before the Crucifixion, after which the series moves to the brighter glorious section, beginning with the Resurrection.

They were conceived to be pondered, slowly and prayerfully walking along the north aisle, from west to east.

The first 5 depict Jesus' infancy, starting with the Announcement of Gabriel to Mary that she would give birth. The Annunciation, The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, The Nativity, (particularly beautiful) his Presentation in the temple and as a young boy teaching there on the occasion when he became separated from his parents on the way home.

(Photo 8)

The 5 Sorrowful Mysteries begin with the events of Maundy Thursday -Christ 's time of agonizing prayer in the garden of Gethsamene (which event we seek to enter into and I hope you will come to church [at 730pm](#) to observe it on Maundy [Thursday 7.30pm](#)); Next is the painting by Rubens of the '**Scourging of Christ**' by his tormentors, the vicious energy of the arms that lash him, powerfully conveyed by Rubens' treatment of the subject;

(Photo 9)

Followed by the humiliation of the '**Crowning with thorns**' and the mocking jeers of his accusers;

Then at No 9 we come to Van Dyck's depiction of '**Christ Bearing His Cross**' on the way to his

crucifixion. (What is actually painted includes 6 of what would become the 14 stations of the cross, a later devotion not then in vogue, which focused on the last day of Jesus life on earth as a man.)

(Photo 10)

Van Dyck's artwork shows the might of soldiers bearing down upon him, the detail of a centurion's face, Jesus fallen under the weight of his Cross and Simon of Cyrene's assistance; but the main thrust, underneath the overwhelming weight of it all, is the anguish on Jesus' face and the tears which roll down it, as he glances back over his right shoulder to see his grieving Mother. Our tower copy has deteriorated over the years, not least due to earlier damp rising up the wall (which Building & Works has now corrected with a correct breathable plaster and ensuring the painting does not actually touch the wall). With just natural daylight, in our copy you can hardly make out that Jesus is in the picture at all, let alone see any of the detail. And even when looking up at the original which I did the other week in Antwerp, given the base of the painting stands about 15 feet above the floor, you also cannot see much detail, but this was later overcome for me by Leo the church guide.

I will return to the detail in a minute, but first want to complete the journey through the series.

(Photo 11)

In the 10th painting of the Crucifixion itself, Jesus and his Mother's gaze do **not meet** - Christ's head is tilted to his left and Mary is on his right - He is painted alone and seems beyond human solace.

Then the brighter palette of colour depicts the Glorious Resurrection, the Ascension and the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Whitsun and concludes, as mentioned with Mary's Assumption and her Crowning.

(Photos 12, 13, 14, 15). (Five second delay between each please)

One gets an interesting sense of the whole from above, which I did from the organ loft. There incidentally, the mighty pipe organ sits in its baroque grandeur, built in 1654, enjoying 3 rebuilds since; admittedly very heavy and clunky to play but producing a resounding mix of sounds, with a glorious 5 second reverberation.

None of the paintings has left St Paul's, with two notable exceptions. The first was when all of them were forcibly transported to Paris under the 1794 French Revolutionary Regime (incidentally, just 2 yrs after the earliest records show our copy here) and only returned in 1816 following Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo. Naturally heavily guarded and keen not to lose them again,
(Photo 16)

the authorities at St Paul's considered a request to lend the Van Dyck for an exhibition at the Prado Museum in Madrid a few years ago. They did agree, under strict conditions, and off it went and back again. This afforded Leo, my guide,
(Photo 17)

opportunity to take close up photographs while at floor level and this is how we can see, despite my iPad photo of his iPad photo, the detail which captures the essence of the painting.

While the Crucifixion draws the gaze of the watcher upwards to the elevated perspective and divine meaning of Christ's death for our salvation, Van Dyck's Christ is literally on the ground and it is the human encounter between a Mother and her Son which captures attention, as you can now see from these close up photos.

(Photos: 18 Centurion, 19 Mary, 20 Jesus). *(Seven second delay between each please)*

The cost of Christ's faithfulness to the Father's will is made vividly clear in the 5 Sorrowful Mysteries in the series. These profoundly human but also divinely mysterious events can help the believer to relive the death of Jesus, to stand at the foot of the cross beside Mary, his Mother, and enter with her, and all the faithful, in every age, into the depths of God's love for humanity and to experience its life-giving power.

(Photo 21)

As you leave Church today, I will turn off the tower lights, leaving the temporary spot light to illuminate the painting. You will probably see more than you have before but evening time is best. So I invite everybody - everybody, not just the usual few, to come to Church for at least one, hopefully more, of the evening services between now and Easter Day - the programme gives you the times; and in the preferred evening light, see for yourself even more of this enigmatic painting. I urge

you not to file past in a rush, but spend a little time pondering its Sorrowful subject, tormented with shame and spitting, who invites us to confess the cause of his suffering and our sinful part in it.

This work of art has come to us first through the commission of St Paul's Antwerp, Anthony Van Dyck himself, schooled by Rubens, as well as the anonymous copier, our presumed, unknown donor, and our predecessors here at St Mary's who resisted the temptation to throw it on the Easter fire as its visibility all but disappeared, darkened with age and neglect. As this year's Passiontide begins, hear afresh the words of Christ "***Is it nothing to you, all ye who pass by?***" and ask what Christ, in this divine Mystery, says to you today. Amen.

