

John

Then Jesus said to the disciple (whom he loved): Behold thy mother! And from that day he took her into his own home.

In the St Mary's Handbook of 1888 it states that 'the late incumbent, Mr. Oldham, arranged before any of the windows were put in, a plan intended to illustrate the Church as a Divine Institution': in the nave the apostles; in the transepts the prophets; in the chancel the history of our Lord; in the West window the Descent of the Holy Spirit. Of all this the centre is formed by the long window above the High Altar with Christ in Majesty, the crucifixion with Mary and John at the foot of the cross, and below this, the body of Jesus laid in the tomb. It is from this central moment between Jesus, his mother and his friend, that the love flows out which fills and enlivens the Church.

Jesus, in his agony, turns to his mother and entrusts to her his beloved friend, and in turn gives her into his friend's care: a simple pure act of caring and kindness amidst all the violence and destruction and cruelty. Jesus, apparently overwhelmed and destroyed by an act of expedient, judicial murder, still showing that he can act in a way which will outdo the dark powers to which he has been delivered. From this action, through the events which are to come, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, will spring a family of friends, of children of God, who are held together by the simple 'new commandment', that they love one another'

It is a view of the church as flowing from Jesus, Mary and the Beloved Disciple, which complements and enlivens more juridical views which place their emphasis on the power of the keys granted to Peter. If in Matthew's Gospel Peter is given the power to bind and loose, to forgive or retain someone's sins, in John's the power is given to all the disciples who live together as a community of friends, bound by mutual love.

So what is happening here between the figures at the foot of the Cross and the crucified Jesus? The scene is set clearly after the death of Jesus: his side is already pierced, and the disciple's gaze is directed upwards towards Christ's head and pierced side from which flow two almost colourless drops, presumably of water and blood. Similar drops run down both his arms in identical patterns from the wounds made by the nails in his hands. Whereas Mary's head is turned downwards with closed eyes as she enters into her grief, John's gaze is directed unwaveringly upwards towards the figure on the cross, as he clasps to his side a finely bound volume of what one can only take to be a copy of his Gospel.

There is a studied lack of realism, that is to say, about the window. Certainly there is no attempt to depict the excruciating torments inflicted on Jesus. Nothing here, either, to suggest the vagrant, mendicant lives which Jesus and his followers had been living. The clothes of the two figures are fine, beautifully lined; their hands delicate, unworn by manual, peasant labour.

If we are to enter into the interior world of this event, we need to take a hint from the Gospel which the disciple holds, so our artist is telling us.

What do we know about the disciple at the foot of the cross? We know that he was the disciple whom Jesus loved. He is not named in the Gospel. He is mentioned for the first time at Jesus' last meal with his disciples, leaning on Jesus' breast. And he is the only male disciple to stand with the women at the Cross. He bears witness formally : to the water and blood to flowing from Jesus' side after the soldiers speared him; and also to the last appearance of Jesus on the shore. He's paired in that story with Peter: Peter the one who has to reaffirm his love for Jesus, he the one whom Jesus loves.

What can we know about what is going on inside his head and heart as he looks so intently at the Crucified? Perhaps the clues are there in the Gospel. In chapter 12 as Jesus looks towards his death he says: 'I, when I am lifted up will draw all people to me. ... Now is the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified.' Jesus, the Son of Man is flesh, flesh and blood, one of us. There are no traces of the Virgin Birth in John's Gospel, no story of the annunciation. Jesus treats his mother quite roughly on her first appearance in the Gospel at the wedding at Cana. But however that may be, in this man's dying, in the culmination of a life washing other's feet, there is revealed the true face of divine love. The Beloved Disciple's testimony to the water and the blood from Jesus' side concludes with a quotation from Zechariah: 'They shall look on him whom they have pierced.'

This is the culmination, the drawing together of all that Jesus has been and done, as his own final words make clear: 'It is finished.' Here it all comes together: In the simple, pure act of providing for his mother and his friend, even against all the forces of destruction, his life achieves a rightness, a final beauty: here God shines out: the God whose life fills his, appears in his glory in this cruel death. His Father glorifies his Son, so that the Son, having loved his own to the end, can glorify him, can show the world the beauty and the glory of God's pure, simple abundant love. This is life, eternal life, the heart of the world. This is what the Beloved Disciple has just seen and what he will spend the rest of his- long - life writing and preaching about. This is a man faced with the appalling death of his dearest friend, transformed, transfixed

by a simple, pure act of care and kindness. Nothing will ever be the same again: the world is made new, from this moment love flows out from the heart of the world, drawing all into the warm circle of his recognition, filling the church with its light and truth.