

St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow open, inclusive, welcoming

**For the Feast of Corpus Christi
St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow
11th June 2020**

Dr. Deborah Lewer on Tilman Riemenschneider, Altar of the Holy Blood, 1501-1505, limewood sculpture, Lutheran Church of St. Jakob (St. James), Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany

1

Welcome to this podcast from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow. My name is Debbie Lewer. I am an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's. We celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi today. It's a time of joy and for giving thanks: for what we receive, what feeds us, for communion.

So it's a good time to take a look back, to an object that vividly dramatises the origins of the Eucharist that we celebrate in bread and wine. It was carved over 500 years ago, by the great German sculptor of the late Gothic, Tilman Riemenschneider. It has met weary pilgrims for centuries, travelling on the ancient route of St James. It transforms dead wood into a reminder of that last meal of one life that is also the first meal of new life.

2

Riemenschneider's Altar of the Holy Blood is many things at once. Cut from the limewood that suited so well the needs of the sculptor, it's a large, intricate reliquary: High above, flanked by angels, there is a small crystal casing at the heart of a cross. It contains a tiny drop of a medieval relic – blood, that once miraculously appeared from spilt wine, from a chalice. Below this distant and mysterious object is a scene more earthly and more familiar – of friends eating and drinking: the last supper of the disciples, with Jesus, breaking bread and sharing wine.

3

Gathered around the table, the faces and bodies are expressive. There's a lively discussion going on. It involves what's also most unusual here: that it is not Jesus, but Judas whom the artist places centre stage. He approaches the table, already holding the money bag that symbolizes his betrayal. Almost unseen, John rests his head on Jesus. Peter crosses his arms. James, in a pilgrim's hat, looks to the distance. Turning to us, Philip gestures – to Judas and below, down to the place where the blessed sacrament – the bread of the host - was once displayed, for adoration. This is a work full of symbolism. But perhaps the most eloquent is that every tired and dirty pilgrim, rich or poor, arrived at this church, with his or her need, and approached the table in Judas's footsteps.

4

There's something austere about Riemenschneider's altar, the figures set, not against gold, but real ordinary glass, like that of any windows. In its time, it was unusual for its frugal lack of any colour, any gilding of the holy scene. Can we find the joy, the exuberance of the feast here? It is a work about Jesus's passion, moments that led to death. The wings of this altarpiece are fixed open on these scenes, never closed.

But look again. All around there are the vigorous shoots of new life, climbing foliage, the twirling stems of roses, that also symbolize wounds, delicate petals even in hard wood, among the thorns. Transformation is everywhere. So, whether we approach this table with joy or in fatigue, with a light step or with the weight of failure, at its real centre is what is taken, blessed, broken, and given, no matter who we are.