Stained Glass: Living Images from the Endless Drama of Faith and Worship

It may well be true that to many artists religious faith is a closed book. I am quite sure the converse is true – to many people of religious faith art is seen as a closed book and a mystery. This situation is unfortunate, and the task which is before us, as artists and people of faith, is to bring art and faith together to enrich and inform each other.

What are the subjects artists might choose to depict in their glasswork, or that churches might commission? The range is enormous. Large cathedrals might cover all the main stories of the bible, beginning with Adam and Eve, or Abraham and the Patriarchs and ending with the risen Christ and the Last Judgement. In the Northern Hemisphere where the nave of a cathedral is aligned east to west, with the sanctuary at the east, the northern side is frequently given over to Old Testament subjects and the southern side (where the light was best) to the New Testament. In the sanctuary the Virgin and Child or the Passion Story is depicted, and at the western end the Last Judgement. There is logic and order in the arrangement of the images in the windows. In Christ Church, St Kilda, are depictions of the major events in the life of Christ in the glass of the sanctuary: annunciation, birth, baptism, crucifixion and deposition, resurrection and ascension. In a great cathedral, the worshipper entering and moving around the nave to the sanctuary, can remember the great events of the Christian story. In particular, the Stations of the Cross (depicting 14 stages in the Passion Story, from the house of Pilate to the tomb) were set up in cathedrals to be visited by church-goers during the season of Lent. This was to be done in exactly the way that pilgrims visited the 14 actual sites in Jerusalem. To move around the Stations of the Cross in the church, stopping at each for meditation was a mini-pilgrimage. It was the acting out, in memory and imagination, of the drama of the passion. If religious artwork is full of the stories of Christianity, all of these can be understood as pointing inward to the greatest story of them all.

In church worship there are two things which have a strong bearing upon art: memory and presence. The stories we see depicted in glass, painting and sculpture stir the memory of all that we share in our history and corporate experience. Presence is as vital in art and Christianity as memory. For centuries the church has spoken about the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, describing the mysterious experience of countless people who have sensed and felt that presence. When we look at the very best of stained-glass art, aware of its glowing colours and images around us in the church, and when we see such palpably real figures as those painted by such artists as Mervyn Napier Waller and others, do we not experience presence? As artists we need to be aware of the mysterious nature of presence. The images we create might be instrumental in evoking certain experiences of God’s presence. The church is the place of an unending dialogue. A handbook given to visitors at Coventry Cathedral contains these words:

Reverend Ian Johnston

Ian Johnston is a minister of the Uniting Church who has served in various parishes for over 20 years. He is keenly interested in religious art – especially stained glass, and works as a ‘warm’ glass artist and brownsmith. He has undertaken several commissions to produce liturgical art for churches including panels in steel and glass for the Uniting Church, Mt Eliza and Glen Waverley. His other artistic interests include drawing and watercolour painting. Prior to entering the ministry he trained as an electrical engineer. Secondary interests include engineering, astronomy and writing, mainly for church journals.
The Importance of the Human Figure

When we speak of stories, remembrances, and presence, it seems obvious that images of the human figure must play an important part in Christian art. In earlier times, the right to depict human images was certainly not taken for granted. There were those in the church who regarded the display of any images of Christ, Mary, the saints and martyrs, as idolatry. This conviction, fuelled by an over emphasis on the veneration of icons, led the Eastern Church of the 8th century to remove and destroy icons from churches. After much turmoil, the church affirmed that since Christ was not ashamed to become incarnate as a human being, by implication all images of his fleshly appearance were permissible and even necessary in Christian worship. But strong rules were retained regarding the way in which human images were to be depicted and icons, ancient and modern, retain a certain formality of design to this very day. Perhaps a little of that formality of design has been imparted to stained-glass images also, just as it exists in the formal words of the spoken liturgy.

Abstraction: Does it Lead to Heresy?

The formality and the humanity of traditional church art raise the question: is abstract design rather than figurative design appropriate in the church setting? Yes, with certain cautions. Some of our modern stories are best portrayed in abstract designs. In 1985 I saw the ‘Technicians and Space’ window in Washington Cathedral in which an authentic fragment of moon rock is set in the glass. This window depicts the historic journey to the moon in terms of spiralling rocket trajectories and swirling vortices. The abstract design seems to convey the mystery of creation, not emptied by the space venture, but deepened. Contemporary themes like this lend themselves very well to abstract design.

So do certain biblical themes like the strange metaphors from the Book of Revelation, such as the church as the Bride of Christ, or heaven as the New Jerusalem. Indeed it is right (and irresistible) that we should incorporate the abstract metaphors of modern design into contemporary stained glass. However, when modern churches contain nothing but abstract images and symbols, how do we read the traditional stories of our faith when no human figures are seen in the artwork? At least some of our modern images should not be too obscure or require many pages of explanation. They should be capable of being read and understood. The images and metaphors of Christianity are concrete, even crude and primitive. If abstract design can do justice to the real and earthy concepts, let us agree to it. But art which is merely suggestive of a vague spirituality and which is not anchored to the real physical world of human existence will do us all a disservice. It will be neither earthy nor sublime.

The Future

What does the future hold for ecclesiastical stained glass? Our newest buildings are very different from the old. We cannot and should not attempt to reproduce windows, such as those of Christ Church, which express the faith of an era now
past. This, of course, is an overwhelming argument for the preservation of these windows at all costs. Glassworkers should think carefully and creatively about new window spaces which architects are providing. How does the light enter—from the rear only, or from the front as well? Are windows low enough to be touched? Do they lend themselves to a semi-sculpted technique in glass and steel (as I have tried in an experimental way to do)? If we are creative and innovative, we will establish an identifiably Australian style of church art. If, as artists, we can enter fully into the ancient and contemporary stories of Christian faith and interpret them in a way which genuinely excites and moves us, we will undoubtedly be successful.