



## Check against delivery

### **The Bishop of St Albans: Presidential Address** Diocesan Synod: 8 March 2008

Here are some instructions on how to make a thirteenth-century Italian cross to be hung in a church. First of all, find yourself some poplar wood, preferably *populus alba*, and cut a section across the centre of the trunk of the tree, a section which will not warp. For this, of course, you will need a keen-eyed carpenter of some integrity. Then, using the same carpenter, get him to make the cross up into its familiar shape. He will need nails, glue and maybe some dowels, to ensure a neat and permanent fit where the sections of wood are required to abut each other. You should arrange for the same carpenter, if you trust him, a) to be available to fit small battens on the back of the cross to strengthen it, and b) to be available to create a stand on the top of the rood screen from which the cross, when it is finished, can be hung. It will need to lean out towards the congregation at, say, a seventy-five-degree angle.

After this you can begin the process of treating the timber with a number of coats of glue size, preferably made from parchment chippings, boiled and soaked in water. Once that has been completed, take strips of linen canvas, soak them in size and lay them on the wood. When the size has completely dried, you can then place onto the canvas coats of powdered gypsum, mixed with animal glue. For this you will need a kind of putty knife. When the first coat is dry, you will need to scrape it down to obtain as flat and smooth a level as you can.

Then, having prepared some *gesso sottile* for a month beforehand, you should make the material into loaves, which you will have to allow to dry. Once dried out, you will need to soak them again in water, and grind them up with a porphyry pestle on a porphyry slab. You should then take the ground-up *gesso sottile*, make it into a lump, squeeze out the moisture, cut it into slices and mix it with a parchment glue. You must keep the resulting mixture warm over a pan of water. Once it is ready, you should apply it with a soft bristle brush onto the surface. The first coat you should rub in with your fingers; subsequent coats will then be required, remembering to put them on in alternate directions. You will need to apply at least eight coats. Once the coats have dried, you will need to scrape them down. If you sprinkle powdered charcoal on the surface, you will be able to see, once the surface has been properly scraped and no charcoal remains, that the surface is sufficiently smooth.

Once this has been done, you can begin the process of outlining the design, using a stick of charcoal tied to a cane. I won't continue, though I could have mentioned the gilding, the

punching, the creation and application of the paints ... If you want to know more, read *Art in the Making: Italian Painting Before 1400*<sup>1</sup>.

I wish that there were a similar book about the physical processes involved in the writing of a gospel - how firstly you would need to buy or create for yourself a roll of parchment or papyrus, sufficient in length to accommodate about fifteen thousand words. Secondly, you would need to ensure that you have a sufficient supply of ink (and I wonder what that would be made from - probably from oak galls) and a selection of styli. Then, before you begin to make your first mark, you must ensure that you have an outline sketch of the story - and finally, you must never forget that the opening sentence must grab the attention of your listeners, and be aware, even before you begin, what your final sentence will say.

I do not think that we have given anything like the attention we should to the craft processes involved in preparing the scrolls for the Gospels, nor have we considered the care required when not only the physical object is created, but the care required to ensure that the story is so designed that it fits the physical structure onto which it is written. Fortunately for our generation, however, some of those physical craft characteristics are now being given attention. Richard Burrige of King's College, London, has drawn attention to the numbers of words on an average scroll, for example, in his recent study of John's Gospel, and Graham Stanton of Cambridge has written some fascinating material about the early Christian use of codices, that is, book format epistles and maybe gospels:

*Even before Paul wrote his first 'canonical' letter, about AD50, followers of Jesus were accustomed to use the predecessors of the codex book format, various kinds of 'notebooks'. They used them for scriptural excerpts and testimonies, for drafts and copies of letters, and probably also for collection of traditions of both the actions and the teaching of Jesus*<sup>2</sup>.

What I relish about the making of thirteenth-century Italian roodscreen crosses and the making of the first-century gospels, is the physical and detailed processes carried out by the artist craftsmen in both cases.

But I want to press this even further - the actual choice of the materials is bound to affect what you paint or what you write, as well as how you paint and how you write. Do you remember, long before the days of word processors, how a scratchy nib and watery ink had their effect upon your letters or your school essay? And now, to press on yet further - those physical processes in the hands of great artists and great writers can lead to the creation of works of art of inspiring quality. In addition, subsequent artists then find themselves in later years not only trying their hand at the same thing but also branching off into new media, new styles. And, from time to time, in the artistic process, a genius emerges who casts entirely new light ...

Let me give an example from the world of literature. *The Dream of the Rood* was written down in the late tenth century and is one of three related narratives concerning the cross on which Jesus died. What is absolutely unique about *The Dream of the Rood* is the way in which it dramatises the Crucifixion from its own point of view. Let me quote from some of its opening lines:

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<sup>1</sup> Bomford 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Stanton 2004, p.165.

*Long ago was it - I still remember it -  
that I was cut down at the edge of the forest, moved from my trunk.  
Strong foes took me there, fashioned me to be a spectacle for them,  
bade me raise up their felons.  
Men bore me on their shoulders there, till they set me on a hill;  
many foes made me fast there.  
I saw then the Lord of mankind hasten with great zeal  
that He might be raised upon me.  
Then I durst not there bow or break against the Lord's behest,  
when I saw the surface of the earth shake;  
I could have felled all the foes, yet I stood firm ...<sup>3</sup>*

Right at the heart of this remarkable and moving prose poem is an ethical dilemma:

*... the Cross, loyal to its Lord, is required by the 'Lord's word' to destroy its lord's life<sup>4</sup>.*

Following Anglo-Saxon warrior tradition, in the poem Christ is described in these terms:

*Then the young Hero - he was God almighty -  
firm and unflinching, stripped Himself;  
He mounted on the high cross, brave in the sight of many,  
when He was minded to redeem mankind<sup>5</sup>.*

I have read and reread that prose poem at various stages in my life and never fail to find it moving. It takes me, through its audacious ideas couched in poetry, into another facet of the truths revealed at the Crucifixion. The creator of the poem is unknown - but what an artist he was! Whilst we know very little about him, it is very tempting to suggest that he might have taken part in the artist craftsman's journey to a forest to select timber out of which a bejewelled cross could be made - and in that process perhaps was born the idea which would one day emerge into the literature and spirituality of our country as *The Dream of the Rood*. Who knows?

You and I are at that stage in the Christian calendar when we are getting closer to the events of Holy Week, a time when we walk the Way of the Cross. Much of our journey will be expressed through liturgies which have their roots deep in history - the Veneration of the Cross, for example, was known in Jerusalem in the fourth century. Those liturgies, too, are the creations of artists, of theologians, of poets; they are, in their own way, as well crafted as the thirteenth-century Italian crosses and as well crafted as the Anglo-Saxon poetry described earlier. How, then, should we approach this Holy Week?

Well, I pray that it will be with thanksgiving for those gifts of eye and hand and brain which have created the Gospels, the crosses, the hymns, the poetry and the liturgies which help to shape our Christian souls. But it is, of course, far deeper than that. Holy Week is not simply about aesthetic responses to the glories of our Christian inheritance, beautiful and wondrous though those glories are. Our response is to Jesus of Nazareth, the artist - craftsman from the

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon 1926, pp.235-236.

<sup>4</sup> ÓCarragáin 2005, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon 1926, p.236.

village carpenter's shop, who offered up his own body onto the wooden cross as the means by which the truth and beauty of God might be revealed. Whereas in all other areas of craft and art there is a necessary and inevitable separation between the artist and the object created, be it a painting or a gospel or a poem, in the case of our Lord, the artist and the message are one and the same. If you prefer that idea in explicit Biblical language: 'the Word became flesh'. Trying to express that most holy truth is daunting and metaphors tumble over each other. He takes the rough-hewn planks of our humanity and bejewels them with his sacrificial blood. He is the one who continues to call us from the Tree towards the Tree, so that in its leaves and fruits we might see and taste forgiveness, eternity and the love of God. He, the Creator of all the trees in the forest, is fastened tight to His own creation and, through His death, redeems us all. Even so, no metaphor is adequate to comprehend the mystery of Jesus' death and our salvation.

As a Church, we are frequently seduced into thinking that we have to fulfil this or that programme, respond to this or that need - or worse, to use techniques to win souls for Christ. Holy Week and Easter are the most powerful reminders possible that they are not our central task. Our central task is to simply gaze on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and allow the mystery and the truths of that event to shape our lives - now, and always. Entering into Holy Week and Easter is our true vocation, and from that all else flows.

May we, as a diocese, remain true to that profound and holy vocation - and for the rest, simply pray: 'Lord, have mercy,' letting God in Christ shape us and our Church into what He would have us become.

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