

## Church Art – comparing the 11<sup>th</sup> station in two local churches: (2) St Theresa’s Wilmslow

I explained last week that these two articles are abridgements of an Art A level essay that my daughter wrote many years ago, comparing the 11<sup>th</sup> Station at St Mary’s, Mulberry Street, Manchester with that in St Theresa’s, Wilmslow. The 1995 Stations in St Mary’s are enormous modern art originals painted by Norman Adams R.A. with intense close-up focus on Christ’s suffering, particularly evident in the 11<sup>th</sup> Station of Jesus being nailed to the Cross. This second article conveys how the essay dealt with its equivalent in St Theresa’s and conclusions drawn from comparing the two.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Station in St Theresa’s hangs several feet away from its neighbours, the church being bigger and the Stations much smaller than in St Mary’s. The eye is not distracted by adjoining Stations. The Wilmslow Stations are archetypal oil paintings, entirely naturalistic; any bright colours have dulled over time since their creation in 1914. Their artist is unknown. No artistic flourishes or interpretations beyond the absolutely necessary are apparent. They are purely for religious worship and prayer, not artistic appreciation. Catholics may argue that this is how Stations should be, created for religious devotion, not using Christ’s Passion for artistic experiment. As with the Adams’ painting, in the 11<sup>th</sup> Station in St Theresa’s the Cross lies horizontally, with Christ’s hand being nailed down. The man nailing the hand is bare-chested and wearing a green robe. His face is expressionless, perhaps denoting indifference to Christ’s suffering, more probably because the painting is quite small and the technique somewhat basic. It contains some traditional icons. Unlike the Adams’ Christ, who wears a crown of red, blue, yellow and green triangles representing the thorns, the Wilmslow Station shows Him with a naturalistic crown of thorns and a tripartite halo representing the Holy Trinity. Our Lady is dressed in blue to symbolise her purity and virginity, alongside a woman whose long hair and pot of ointment identifies her as Mary Magdalen. In the background is another holy woman, dressed symbolically in white. The Roman, depicted as far larger than the other figures, wears armour and has the INRI placard under his arm, ready for mounting above Christ’s head. His size denotes his control over the situation. There is also man wearing a red loincloth, the colour of blood and violence. He is standing on Jesus’ arm as He is being nailed. The scene is more realistic than the Adams’ painting as it shows several men, rather than just one, overpowering Our Lord. The face of Christ is contorted in pain, His body bound to the Cross, save for the hand being nailed. The landscape is simplistic, with a hint of buildings in the background and scrubland in the foreground. The Station hangs quietly in St Theresa’s, neither gaudy nor a significant piece of art - a humble depiction of the most tragic murder in history. Despite its lack of artistic flair, it respectfully marks a moment of huge religious significance. Parishioners may pray quietly before it, without disturbance or distraction. The Adams’ Stations, by contrast, are extremely successful and moving pieces of artwork which attract visitors and tourists and risk disturbing their primary purpose of prayerful sacred devotion. The Wilmslow stations better serve this primary purpose and so may be said to be more successful pieces of art in context.

A footnote to my daughter’s ideas: Orthodox icons do not look like either Church’s Stations. Yet icons do resemble the Wilmslow Stations in that they are intended to be devotional rather than appreciated as works of art. However, as with the Adams’ Stations, they are not naturalistic but stylised abstractions of Jesus, Mary etc.

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