

Church Art – comparing the 11th station in two local churches: (1) St Mary's Manchester

I recently came across an essay written many years ago by my daughter as part of her Art 'A' Level work. Its focus was a comparison between the 11th Station of the Cross as depicted in St Mary's Mulberry St, Manchester and in St Theresa's, Wilmslow. For me it raised an interesting perspective on church art and so, in a very abridged form and with her permission, I reproduce it across two articles, of which this is the first.

The 11th Station is one of the most poignant stations, representing the agonising pain of the thick iron nails being driven through Christ's hands and feet. Almost invariably it is one of Jesus' hands which is being nailed, the feet having usually been already bound and nailed to the Cross. The viewer's eye is thus drawn to the action in the painting and to the face of Christ twisting and writhing in agony. The stations in St Mary's were painted by Norman Adams R.A., having been commissioned by Father Clinch from a shortlist drawn up by Sister Wendy Beckett. They were installed in 1995. The artist described them as "the greatest works of his life". His 11th Station is a detail from the usual depiction, focusing very closely on Jesus' face and right hand, which is being nailed, and on the face of the man nailing it. The face of Christ is seen horizontally and takes up almost a third of the canvas. Almost all of the painting is awash with a very bright, earthy red colour; the face of Christ is simply drawn onto this red with a greyish green formation of a line drawing. Christ's mouth is in shades of light pink, His teeth shown tightly clenched in suffering, their whiteness glaring out at the viewer's eye, forcing the eye towards the pain. Facial creases of worry are drawn into the face, creating three bags under the left eye, representing the Holy Trinity in the most physical depiction both of Christ's suffering and of His holiness. It is, however, impossible to see any of this in Christ's eyes, as Adams painted the eyes as a blue flower, representing Christ's innocence. The blue flower also conjures up images of the Virgin Mary. The red which so overpowers the Station is representative of the blood and pain.

Throughout his stations, Adams concentrates mostly on the faces and hands of the figures, making each piece, about 160cm x 100cm, look almost like a detail from an even larger painting. Adams says this was because he wanted to feel "*really close to Christ, a one-to-one relationship*"; his original drawings had been whole figures. This creates a very intense relationship between the viewer and Christ with deeper thought and insight into His ordeal and facilitating the work as a source of devotion. The 11th station has just 3 images: Christ, the man nailing Him and the Cross. The viewer is not distracted by mourners or background landscape. Nothing is superfluous. Christ's agony is the viewer's only focus, making it easier to use the station as an aid to prayer. The horror marks an end to the kind of stations around which one can wander, muttering prayers without proper thought.

One problem with Adams' stations is that they are so large in such a small church. There are only a couple of centimetres between them. Yet the Way of the Cross represents a long and arduous journey, so it seems inappropriate that one hardly needs to take a step between each one. This, together with their brightness and unusual character, make it difficult to appreciate one at a time since the eye is drawn to its neighbours. It is a shame that these beautiful stations which work so well should be marred by their inevitably crowded hanging.

Stephen S.