

Art and Craft

in St. Martin's, Hawksburn

A talk for St. Martin's Day, 12 Nov. 2006

by Rodney Wetherell

I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the Lord. (Ps. 122)

Even more than in most churches, everything in St. Martin's focuses attention on the high altar and the great east window. This window has been an inspiration to generations of worshippers here. What do you think is the secret of its magnetism? For one thing, it's less busy than many Victorian stained glass windows. The central figure of Christ is very striking, surrounded by lots of blue sky – and what a wonderful blue it is. The figure is not Jesus dying or dead, it's the risen Christ on the cross, uniting death and resurrection in a way you can't miss. There's something a bit shocking about it – a healthy and triumphant man hanging on a cross – and it expresses one of the great paradoxes and mysteries of the faith.

St. Martin's was designed as a church where worship would be conducted with reverence, colour and dignity, restoring the ancient traditions of the church which had been suspended at the Reformation. Our first priest-in-charge, the Reverend William Kennedy Brodribb, described as saintly, and probably eccentric, was determined this would be a building suitable for Anglo-Catholic worship in a diocese then quite Evangelical – in the climate of the day he was rebellious, though conservative in his desire to revive tradition. The figures and symbols in the window were undoubtedly decided by Brodribb, but cartoons were prepared by a parishioner named Chester Earls, probably a non-professional artist, and passed on to the firm of Brooks Robinson with a commission to make the windows. When they were finished, it seems that there had been a miscalculation. The glass was too big for the space available, and it had to be slightly reduced on arrival – very tricky I'm sure. That's why there are not quite as many stars as there should be, and I'll say more about that a bit later.

If you would like to identify all the figures and symbols in the east window, there are two very interesting pages devoted to them in the first history of the parish by Cyril Woodforde Kett, published for the 50th anniversary in 1933. The six saints are all named in the window apart from the obvious ones – Mary the mother of Jesus and St. John at the foot of the cross. In the left hand light are three figures: at left, St. Austin – this is St. Augustine, not the one from Hippo but the great missionary to England and first Archbishop of Canterbury who died in the year 605; then St. Martin our patron saint, Bishop of Tours, who died in 397; the third figure is St. Eanswith, founder of the first religious order for women in England, and a favourite of Brodribb who named his daughter after her. There is a link between St. Eanswith and St. Martin – she is said to have attended the church of St. Martin in Canterbury. That was in the 7th century, so you see how early St. Martin was honoured in England, though he was a French saint. I feel pretty sure there would not be another window in the world depicting Martin, Augustine and Eanswith together – contradict

me if you can. The right hand light is even more unusual, depicting St Stephen the first martyr; then of all people St Louis, the King of France who led two of the Crusades; and St. Alphege, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 11th century and martyred also, under the Danes. I suggest there is much fruitful meditation in trying to work out why Brodribb chose these particular saints for the window – just what do they have in common? Memo to Vicar – sermon material here. That large oval outline around the crucifix goes by the technical term 'Glory' with a capital G, and if you use a bit of imagination you will see it's designed in the shape of a fish, the tail being also the stream of light from the dove representing the Holy Spirit. Just below that are Alpha and Omega, first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The seven stars mark the seven days of creation, and numerous other things. According to the Book of Revelation:

As for the mystery of the seven stars, they are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (Rev. 1:20)

There are five stars in the left hand light or window, and six in the right hand one – why? Kett records that two stars on the left disappeared, and one on the right, in the process of reduction to fit the space. Originally there were three sets of seven stars. Along the bottom are a series of symbols, some more obvious than others. The first on the left shows a lantern, a sword and a sponge on a reed – for the vinegar given to Jesus on the cross. Next is a pillar, a rope and two scourges, then a heart within a crown of thorns. Yes, it's all to do with the passion of Our Lord – all seven symbols. This window went in only a couple of years after the retirement of the anti-ritualist Bishop Perry, first Bishop of Melbourne, and I think we can be sure it would not have happened during his long episcopate. Moorhouse the second bishop was much more liberal. There are not one but two sacred hearts – how very un-Anglican. The Feast of the Sacred Heart was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1856, but has never made it into the Anglican calendar. Dr. Colin Holden the expert on church art tells me that Brooks Robinson made windows for many Roman Catholic churches in Victoria, and Brodribb chose symbols which had possibly already been used in Catholic churches. All these symbols are known as the Instruments of the Passion, and Mel Gibson would enjoy them I'm sure, especially the hammer, the nails and the pincers in the second symbol from the right. A bloodcurdling sermon here. The other two windows in the sanctuary are much later – they're also fine, but what I would call busy like so many old church windows. They don't grab the eye like the central one. On the left we have a lovely nativity scene, below which is Our Lord as the priest about to distribute communion to people in funny hats. Some are children, but if they're not confirmed, why are they receiving communion? The inscription is 'And the word was made flesh'. This window went in in 1925. On the right is St. John, as late as 1937, with his gospel and his eagle. St. John always has an eagle. Below is Jesus with three men – what is he doing? There's a boat there, not very clear, and he's not in it. Therefore he must be walking on the water. Not much sky in these windows, and somehow they look more Victorian than the big window. The dress code in all the windows is more or less that of the Italian Renaissance paintings, which remained de rigeur for something like 500 years.

We don't know the name of the stained glass artist who made the east window – he or she was just one of the designers employed by Brooks Robinson. There are however, at least three artists or craftsmen of some fame represented in the church fabric. One of them is Robert Prenzel, said to be the finest wood carver to have worked in Victoria and possibly in Australia. He made the wonderful reredos, the structure behind the altar which was installed in 1913, and also the panelling put in three years later.

So Solomon built the house, and finished it. He lined the walls of the house on the inside with boards of cedar; from the floor of the house to the rafters of the ceiling, he covered them with wood. The cedar was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers. (1 Kings 6:14-15)

Prenzel was one of the very talented Germans who settled in Victoria in the 19th century – another was Baron von Mueller of Botanic Gardens fame. He was born in Kittlitzreben, Prussia, became a wood carver and arrived in Melbourne in 1888. There is only one book about Prenzel, written by Terence Lane of the National Gallery, and in it you will find a photograph of our reredos taken in Prenzel's studio in Toorak Road South Yarra, just before it was moved to the church. Unfortunately neither reredos nor panelling are in the style on which his fame rests. This is what's called Gumnut Art Nouveau, and to quote Lane, 'Prenzel had the idea of grafting Australian flora and fauna on to the flowing lines of international Art Nouveau'. In the chapel of Trinity College in Royal Parade all the pews are decorated by possums, sugar gliders and platypi, as are the pews in St. John's Toorak. In Prenzel's furniture on view in the National Gallery of Victoria, notably a bedroom suite, you will see Australian flowers and small wildlife in plenty – this is an absolute delight. He may well have offered wombats and goannas to St. Martin's and been declined. However, what we do have is of the highest quality in wood carving, there's no doubt about that. The theme of the carving on the reredos is eucharistic - vine leaves and grapes, though I did try to persuade myself they were gumnuts. During the First World War, like most Germans, he was subject to taunting and name-calling by so-called patriots, even though he had become a naturalized Australian in 1897. There was a scurrilous newspaper called The Graphic which in 1916 published an article accusing various churches of encouraging what it called 'Hunnish iniquity', and I quote 'The latest sinner in this respect is St. Martin's Hawksburn where the chancel was recently renovated and adorned with a roll of honour board, handsomely carved, upon which are carved the names of Anzacs who had been members of the church. This honour board was designed and carved by a Prussian.' The enemy in our midst, in other words. In a copy of this article in the Gallery archives, Prenzel wrote 'I did not carve an honour board for St. Martin's, only the reredos and panelling'. As a result of the anti-German propaganda, he was dropped by both government and society patrons, only the churches continuing to use him as a carver. He retired to Black Rock, kept working, and died in 1941. Did he carve our high altar? No, but who did, and when? I can find nothing in the archives about this, so there's a challenge for someone in the future. It looks to me somewhat later than the reredos, perhaps into the 1920s, and probably oak not blackwood. It's beautifully carved as well, though the design may be a bit pedestrian. It's recorded that Prenzel donated to St. Martin's a credence table for the chapel at the back of the church. No doubt he was grateful for our

commissioning him when others had dropped him. Fr. David Head believes that the small table standing in the central aisle is the one given by Prenzel. He also made a second reredos for the chapel, erected in 1920, the whole chapel being dedicated as a war memorial. This was replaced many years ago by hangings, now also gone, and no-one seems to know what happened to the reredos.

Moving along, we look upwards at the lovely small windows containing four symbols: a bull and an eagle on the south side, what could be a sheep and a human face on the north side. The sheep is actually a lion – what do these things symbolize? The four evangelists, the angel or man for Matthew, the lion for Mark, the bull or ox for Luke, and the eagle for John. My father used to preach on a text relating to the building of Solomon's Temple,

Now the capitals that were upon the tops of the pillars were of lilywork, four cubits.

(1 Kings 7:19)

That is, the builders put in lovely decoration in places where it could hardly be seen. These windows are part of St. Martin's lilywork. The organ is another prized possession of this church, not only the sound but the appearance. The parish had to raise over \$100,000 in the early 1990s for the organ restoration, and part of this was the removal of thick gold paint applied in 1952, to reveal the superb Victorian design we see today. I should mention another example of fine wood carving, the old choirstalls which were in the chancel from 1902 to 2005. These were donated in memory of Charles William Truelove, choirmaster (but not organist) from 1887 to 1904, credited with building up our choir to be the best in the Diocese. A reminder of the choirstalls is what some of us call the holy roller in the narthex, the creation of which was given in memory of Ethel 'Granny' Tyler – you can see a small plaque to that effect recently attached. I have nothing special to say about the prayer desks, chairs or even the pulpit, except to say they're all or nearly all of 19th or early 20th century origin and fine examples of the carver's craft. The pulpit was dedicated in 1903 by the Revd. Ernest Selwyn Hughes, vicar of St. Peter's Eastern Hill who grew up in the parish – more of him later. Many will remember that the pulpit used to be nearly twice as high as it is now. The bottom half was made into the table in the narthex.

Just by the pulpit is the St. Martin's Shrine, with the fine banner made by Heather Hooper, the androgynous figure sculpted by Brett Tyler, and the print of St. Martin and the Beggar by el Greco, taken from the original in Washington DC. The beggar looks remarkably healthy – he represents Christ himself, whom St. Martin said he saw in the ragged man he encountered along the way. Across the church we have the Walsingham Shrine, with the small sculpture of Our Lady of Walsingham. The window is a good one, showing Mary kneeling at the foot of Jesus – has anyone seen that depicted elsewhere? I don't think I have. The inscription is surprising too: 'Like Mary of Bethany she also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word' – not a Scriptural verse. Why would Mary the mother of Jesus be compared to Mary of Bethany, as if the latter were the more important? We pass by the brass eagle – we expect to see one of these in an old church, but don't often ponder the intricacy of the workmanship, and how valuable they are as antiques. Up above are the newest

stained glass windows in the church, installed in memory of the Hudson family. This notable family which goes back to the earliest days of the parish has not disappeared, though. Wendy Hudson comes when she can, and two of her offspring, Louise and Robert Hay, come regularly. The windows are designed to echo the St. Michael one opposite. He's one of the archangels, another is Gabriel symbolized by the trumpets in the left hand window, and the third is Raphael symbolized by the oil dripping from a cruet and the hands of healing. Michael is the captain of the host of heaven, Gabriel makes announcements and Raphael heals.

Now to the two large windows installed in 1993 in memory of former Vicar Angus Palmer, and Lucy Johnson, stalwart of St. Alban's Armadale who left a considerable bequest to the parish when she died. The maker is Janusz Kuzbicki, who is responsible for windows in several Melbourne churches, notably St. Paul's Cathedral for which he designed and made the great west doors opening on to Federation Square. It's just as well we commissioned Kuzbicki before he became so well-known – we might not be able to afford him now. These are not the kind of stained glass windows that you barely notice – they demand attention, with their dramatic action and commanding figures. One might complain about St. Martin as here depicted – if he's offering his legendary charity to the beggar, why does he look so harsh about it? If you didn't know the story of him cutting his cloak in half with his dagger, you might think he is about to stab the beggar, in another act of martyrdom. In the adjoining window St. Alban the Roman soldier is about to meet this fate at the hands of a fellow soldier, becoming the first English martyr. The Alban theme not only honours Lucy Johnson, but the former parish of Armadale which was amalgamated with St. Martin's in 1983.

In the next two windows, or rather one window with two lights, we meet another notable name, that of Napier Waller, or Mervyn Napier Waller as he was baptised. In his work on windows he collaborated with his first wife Christian, and this window from 1944 is almost certainly by both of them. Waller was born in Penshurst in the Western District in 1893, and died in 1972. He served in the First World War, being wounded badly and losing his right arm. He had to learn to draw and paint all over again, and became a very successful artist. He is best-known for the huge mosaics in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, and he also did the murals in the Melbourne Town Hall and the Myer Mural Hall, not to mention windows in many churches, notably St. Paul's Frankston which has a whole wall of Waller glass. We may wonder why the parish chose St. Alfred and St. Edward for these windows – most of us would refer to King Alfred rather than Saint Alfred, but indeed he was a saint. St. Edward was Edward the Confessor, second-last Anglo-Saxon king of England, just before the Norman Conquest, and said to be a holy man. The choice of these two saints shows the pride in the British religious tradition which was characteristic of the times. There were no post-Reformation saints to be invoked – there are now, for example the New Guinea Martyrs, though we don't have a Vatican-style procedure for creating saints. From about the 1880s there was renewed interest in saints like Alban, Hilda, Oswald, Anselm and Bede – and Alfred and Edward. Napier Waller was known for the straight up and down figures he put in his windows – there is seldom any action as in the Kuzbicki windows. Both Alfred and Edward look very regal, you will agree, unlike the rather wet stereotype saints in most stained glass. I'm not quite sure what all those people above Alfred are doing, but they could be the Danish leader Guthrum

whom Alfred had just defeated in the Battle of Edington. With 29 of his chief men he received baptism – presumably at the point of the sword – after they had signed the Treaty of Wedmore. Why does Alfred hold a ship, and why is that huge prow looming above his head? The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle credits Alfred with inventing a new type of ship, swifter, steadier and higher than earlier ones. At his feet is what looks like a crown – it's something called the Alfred Jewel. Edward the Confessor holds a miniature building – it's his own tomb in Westminster Abbey, built in 1250.

It might sound like an afterthought, but I must mention the art works which are not part of the church fabric, but which we're very proud of: the collection of Arundel prints. We have heard a lot about these in recent times from Ewen Tyler who has been asking for sponsorship to have important conservation work done on them, and this has been completed on several already. Woodforde Kett's history says '15 prints were loaned to the parish by Dr. Wilfrid Kent Hughes', whereas the usual phrase has been 'given to the parish by Canon Ernest Selwyn Hughes'. If it was a loan, the family never asked for them back, and in 1973 there was an exhibition of them all – considerably more than 15 by then – opened by Lady Kent Hughes, who said 'These wonderful paintings make the invisible visible, and the miraculous tangible'. Now we have 38 Arundel prints, which we are claiming to be the largest collection in Australia, and one of the largest in the world, till anyone claims otherwise. The grand total produced by the Arundel Society between 1848 and 1902 was 199. All are copies of religious paintings of the Renaissance era, mostly by Italian masters, though a few are by Flemish and German painters. There is the problem of how many to have hanging at any one time, and where to store the rest, in optimum conditions and safety. They may not be worth a huge amount now, but in time to come they could become extremely valuable.

There's a great deal of art and craft I have not mentioned – the vestments, the communion vessels, the processional crosses, the old banners, the sculpture in the memorial garden. Someone could talk about all these another time perhaps. Meanwhile let's remember all those who have contributed to the art and craft of St. Martin's, either as planners, artists or donors, many of whom were anonymous. The church is of course an unfinished project – though we don't seem to want more furniture or stained glass, there is always room for more art and craft of different kinds, in both church and grounds.

O pray for the peace of Jerusalem: may those who love you prosper.

Peace be within your walls: and prosperity in your palaces. (Ps. 122)