



# Reflections on Stained Glass

Inspiration

Imagination

Interpretation

## Introduction to the Series

In the spring of 1874 an exhibition of paintings by Monet, Renoir, Degas and Cezanne sent shock waves through the critical world of French culture. Instead of the traditional prevailing academic style of painting with its dramatic subjects and solid objects, they presented light and colour in swirls, blobs, and dots, which created a sensation of movements and brightness. The sneering condemnation of the critics mocked them with the title "Impressionists". The general public reacted with the same degree of hostility and condemnation, causing a riot when the paintings were offered for sale.

It may be mystifying to us, from our perspective, more than a century later, as to why the reaction and indignation were so forceful. It is puzzling to wonder what was so threatening to the prevailing taste and sensibility in the works of these painters. It did not lie in their unconventional technique, nor their choice of subject matter, which was extremely ordinary, if not mundane.

What was regarded as so radical about these new painters, was how they had undermined traditional artistic authority. They appeared to abdicate their authority in favour of that of the viewer. They dared to shift the responsibility for the creation of meaning from the one who painted the work, to those who gazed upon it. They invited the viewers not to consume a set of motifs all ready for their admiration, but instead asked them into the sacred sanctuary of creativity where only the artists themselves had previously been allowed. As the art historian expressed it:

The shifting, impermanent colours and light-hearted subjects of these newcomers seemed to be inviting the spectator to participate instead of imposing a single authoritarian view.<sup>1</sup>

The shift that caused outrage in the French art world, the move of attention from the artist's imposed meaning to the viewers' participation in meaning, found a surprising echo nearly a century later in the work of Professor Fred Craddock's work on preaching. In his ground breaking 1971 book, *As One Without Authority*, he articulated and encouraged the importance of the listener in the whole preaching process. He asserted that all preachers need to:

Recognise the listeners as the people of God, and realise that the message is theirs also. The preacher speaks not only to them, but for them and seeks to activate their meanings in relation to what he is saying.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D Sweetman, *Van Gogh: His Life and His Art* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1980) page 62

<sup>2</sup> F Craddock: *As One Without Authority* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1979), page 60

He goes on to assert that

A work of art does not exist totally of itself but is completed by the viewer. Nothing is more disgusting than some religious art that is so exhaustively complete, so overwhelmingly obvious, that the viewer has no room to respond.<sup>3</sup>

He then suggests, what may not seem very radical to us, but certainly was in the 1870's, that the viewer completes the work. In the same way, he asserts in the world of preaching, that the hearer 'completes' the sermon.

We live in changed times. These days there is far more concern about the listeners as members of the congregation than was ever thought about in previous generations. In today's world we are confronted with the importance of the recipient of all communication. All education now focuses not only on material communicated, but on the student who is involved in the communication. Communication theory has changed dramatically with the gradual abandonment of the idea of a passive audience, and its replacement by the concept of highly selective audience, manipulating, rather than being manipulated, by the message.

While it is a mistake to polarise the debate and see it as a change from 'speaker-centred' communication to 'hearer-centred' composition of a sermon, we need to recognise that effective preaching of the Word comes through conscious awareness of the world and also the ethos of the hearer. It is the responsibility and privilege of all effective preachers to help a congregation think theologically about life in the light of the Gospel. I believe this is applicable in the reflection on, and appreciation of, stained glass or indeed any religious artistic work.

An important issue in examining a stained glass window is that it is ultimately designed to say something to our own experience. We are entitled to expect that the window will demonstrate real respect for the Christian symbolism and **also** the complexity of human life. We know from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' preaching that he addressed the issues in the lives and understandings of his contemporaries. What is clear from the writings of the early evangelists is that the words and witness of Jesus were only occasionally misunderstood by those who heard. All too often his words came too close to their lives and existence, so they wanted to expunge all memory of them from the hearts and minds of others who might be influenced by them.

When we look at a stained glass window or object of religious art, we are engaged in an active, critical and imaginative enterprise. We are being asked to allow our own stories, concerns, experience and insights through the witness of the artist, to be informed, shaped and transformed by the larger story of God's grace. This is not merely an exercise in assent to information about God, but participation in a vital experience of the living God, by which we might be changed and transformed.

In this process we are not just concerned with the world of the artist and his or her studio and creative intention. As Paul Ricoeur, the philosopher and hermeneutical commentator, remarked - *most congregations are much more interested in the world in front of the text, rather than the world of the text*. Therefore the stained glass or object is not just a window depicting the biblical narrative and story or parable or symbol, but also allows us to engage with the impact of that perspective on our experience and lives, making it an effective means of engagement with the Gospel.

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<sup>3</sup> F Craddock, *ibid*, page 65

The location of the window and how we observe its story or representative figures engages us in a dialogue with the artist, and more importantly the biblical witness. At the entrance to the Church it may create something of the awe and majesty of God, or remind us of the fact that the world in all its wonder and beauty is a gift and gracious witness to the love of God through colour, movement and artistry. The windows in a side chapel may invite us to prayer and reflective conversation with God, while the dominant windows of the chancel may proclaim something of the central tenets of Christian faith and our encounter with Jesus and his message of salvation, new creation and redemption. Stained glass may challenge us, disturb us, or bring us to prayerful consideration of the biblical witness, and a new and fresh apprehension of the meaning of the Christian message in our lives. What does the representation remind us of in the Gospel or the Old Testament narrative of God's people? How does it recall some forgotten sermon or story learned in Sunday school or in Bible Study? What does emotions may it provoke in us? What might it illuminate in our experience of God at work in our lives in a similar way in which God was at work in the history of the Church? Further, the richness of the colours and the contrasts and the use of light in the stained glass may also be important, reminding us of the variety of human life and experience in the world and how Christ is the Cosmic Saviour of the World.

In this series of reflections, individual writers will offer some comments and interpretation of examples stained glass. They will not be prescriptive or restrictive, but intended to give one contemporary view of the image and perhaps stimulate in the reader thoughts of agreement, application and, sometimes, possible disagreement. They are in this way similar to the 'Starters for Sunday' materials, offering a source of encouragement and open to development and personal adaptation.

Inspiration, Imagination, and interpretation – the scripture inspires, the artist conceives an imaginative design as a result, and the viewer observes and interprets according to their circumstances.

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*Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.*