

Bromley Parish Church

*The
Children's
Chapel
Mural*

by

Alison Hodson

2008



The Children's Chapel mural was painted by Alison Hodson in 2007 / 8 and dedicated to the memory of May Stevens who died in 2000. May taught the children of Bromley Parish Church for many years and the location of the mural as well as a large proportion of its subject matter (plants and animals and the natural world) together make it a marvellous and appropriate memorial to her.

The mural covers the pillars and semi-dome of the apsidal east end of the Chapel. In broad terms the semi-dome evokes heaven and the pillars, earth but the dividing line is deliberately soft and porous, each bleeding into the other. This can lead the viewer to reflect on the ways in which the life of heaven pervades the created earth. In the incarnation Christ reveals God in the world and raises the life of the world to heaven.

The Dome

In the centre of the dome we see God whose everlasting arms are open wide in welcome to all who come to worship or pray in the Chapel. Many spend time in this place in distress or guilt; or in joy and fellowship. All are welcome and all are encouraged to find meaning for themselves in Christ. Behind the figure is the tree of life which frequently crops up in biblical accounts of the life of the created world. We read about it in the Garden of Eden; again in Ezekiel's vision of the river of the water of life and again at the end of the Bible story in the book of Revelation. The tree offers healing and renewal, and refreshment to the weary.

Around the central image we see the firmament presented both in day and night. There are some stars one of which

has six points reminding Christians of our Jewish antecedence. On the right an exquisite dove symbolises the Holy Spirit bringing the love and peace of God to us. We might also see the waters in the firmament and this water teems with life and flows into the world through the central pillars. With this water in mind the dove might evoke memories of the conclusion to the Noah story in which a renewed humanity opens itself once again to the Spirit of God.

The Pillars

All life is to be found in the pillars around the apse. Here we see nature in its beauty and its pain and the full gamut of human emotion. All is interpreted through allusions to the revelation of God in Christ and is centred round the Eucharist through which, supremely, Christians are given a foretaste of heaven. For ease of reference these notes refer to the pillars as numbers 1 to 6 working from left to right.

Pillars 1 and 6

The outer pillars touch the viewer with the extreme human emotions of joy and sorrow; praise and grief. At the foot of pillar 1 a baby lies sleeping in the straw in a conscious evocation of Christmas; but also of the joy of all new life. Above the child a female figure lifts joyous praise to God. Is this Mary proclaiming the Magnificat; or an angel singing to the Glory of God in the highest? Or is it you the viewer. Above her one of the stars returns our minds to Bethlehem.

Pillar 6 provides a stark contrast and invites us to kneel beside a figure who is clearly in sorrow. She kneels by a tree; an old rugged tree into which nails have been hammered.....and is that a hint of blood around the nails? The tree is of course a vine and it has been hacked about and pruned a good deal reminding us of Jesus' observation that we all need to be pruned in order to bear fruit for God.

As our eyes continue upwards from the kneeling figure and the nails they see a fresh growth of vine leaves and grapes which, for Christians cannot but call to mind the Blood of Christ and the new Covenant which it inaugurates. A cockerel reminds us of a seminal moment in the life of one of our Patron Saints, St.Peter and challenges us with the depth of our own devotion to Christ crucified. Back near ground level a beautifully drawn gecko clings to a sun baked wall. The gecko, with its similarity to the tempter on pillar 5, might serve to remind us of the persistence of sin and temptation and indeed of its role in hammering those nails into the tree.

Pillars 2 and 5

Moving in towards the centre we celebrate and revel in the beauty of the natural world. Here the artist's own love of nature's glory has been given full rein in her exquisite representations of butterflies, ladybirds, a bee and a grasshopper. On pillar 2, all are set against a background of nettles, honeysuckle and wild flowers. In God's world weeds have their place, not everything is placed solely for humanity's convenience. On pillar 5 the flowers are more exotic, including irises and blue geraniums, and a humming bird sucks nectar from a lily. This is a 'day' lily suggesting the transience of life and its worldly pleasures.

For all the beauty of these creation pillars their presentation is far from being sentimental. On pillar 2 the thorns are unmistakable reminding us that beauty and brokenness are never far apart. If we raise our eyes though we find that the brokenness may be redeemed as we draw closer to heaven. Pillar 5 takes us back to the Garden of Eden and this time to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here we find a most beautifully crafted serpent with a mischievous glint in his eye and a sumptuous apple in his claws. He winds sinuously round the tree offering temptation to us all. His eye, deliberately human to evoke the very human reality of temptation, is modelled on the artist's own eye. He has legs too, reminding us of his state, and the state of creation itself, prior to The Fall. God's punishment for the serpent was that henceforth he would go upon his belly. The tree itself is very young suggesting the newness of the world before The Fall.

Pillars 3 and 4

The imagery in the centre pillars intertwines more of the natural world and God's creative power with Eucharistic motifs and other signs of remembrance. Here in these pillars the oneness of heaven and earth is at its most explicit with images flowing effortlessly between the two.

At the base of pillar 3 there is the sea. This is one of the classic biblical images of fear and chaos. These are the very antithesis of creation and they face us both with death and also the vulnerability of the order of creation itself. Here it is dark and the waves are fierce but the presence of Jesus; the creative Word of God restores light and peace. For all its fear the water is ultimately the gift of God and without it there would be no life. As we move up the pillar we discover that

its origin is in heaven and at the top of the pillar we find an anchor, the traditional symbol of hope encouraging us to press on to our heavenly home. The fish on this pillar may call all sorts of Biblical recollections to mind. The miraculous draft of 153 fishes caught in Peter's net; Jesus' call to his church to fish for people and so on. This pillar challenges us with the continuing mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel and draw people into the community of Christ. The fish might also remind us of the occasions on which Jesus fed people with bread and fish: the feeding of the 5000 and his resurrection appearance on the lakeside.

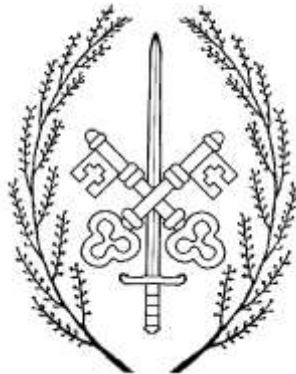
With pillar 4 we begin at the top where the heavenly water of life flows into the world through a bowl, similar, perhaps to the bowl in which Jesus placed cleansing water at the Last Supper. Very soon after he washed the feet of his disciples his blood was to be shed and here in the bowl the water of life becomes the blood of the new Covenant, also a source of life for the world. The flow of blood carries us through a Eucharistic Host which shines brightly with the glory of the risen Christ. Beneath the Host it becomes water again, irrigating the cornfield below. The corn in turn is lifted up and offered to God as a symbol of the work of humankind before being returned to us in the shape of the Body of Christ. Here in the cornfield we find more gorgeous butterflies and some striking red poppies, also an unmistakable symbol of remembrance.

So with the centre pillars our attention is lifted one again to the centre which is always God.

... and finally

Tucked discreetly behind a pillar the determined viewer will find a small dedication of the mural to May Stevens. Those who knew May will understand why this is in the form of a crème egg!!!

Alison Hodson's mural is a remarkable, profound and uplifting backdrop to the worship that is offered in the Chapel. The Eucharistic imagery will enhance worship and the mural's affirmation of the whole range of human emotion will give comfort and hope to all who come here to pray. It's enjoyment of the natural world will evoke thanksgiving and its welcome is an open invitation to all to approach the throne of God's grace.



*Notes by the Rev Michael Camp, Vicar
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