

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Paintings by Chris Woods

The paintings depict the scenes, occasions and final events in Christ's life, set in Vancouver of the 1990s. They were commissioned in November 1994, by a parishioner at St David's, Vancouver. Work began on the first station in April 1995 and the final station was completed in September 1995. The artist used friends and family as models (including his father-in-law for Pontius Pilate). The frames were designed by the artist and the paintings were installed in St David's, Vancouver in February 1996. They are on loan to Holy Trinity by kind permission of St Thomas's, Vancouver.

Chris Woods was born in 1970, and lives in Chilliwack. He writes:

I realized that I was being given the opportunity to experience something that was once the cornerstone of the artist's trade – creating images to illuminate the stories of the Bible for daily use in an established church.

Jesus would be semi-traditional in his looks but still have a modern flavour, the setting would be Vancouver, and the soldiers would be dressed in suits so as to resemble secret government agents or big business cronies.

One may find it strange to set a two-thousand-year-old Biblical story into a modern context, but it is interesting to learn, however, that western artists throughout art history (particularly the renaissance) have frequently placed Jesus in their own time.

As well as technical research, I spent a lot of time reading the four gospels in the new testament of the King James Bible to better understand the story of the crucifixion and to make sure I got all the details correct. I also read any book I could get my hands on concerning biblical history and customs and practices of the time. Even though the paintings were to take place in a modern setting, I wanted the story depicted in my paintings to be historically accurate.

The artist has said of the commission: "it has improved me as a person and as an artist."

Some theologians emphasise that Christ's death and resurrection ought not to be dissociated and propose a fifteenth 'station' for meditation on the Resurrection. Indeed, most Anglican stations, which differ slightly from the Roman catholic, use Prayer Book collects that mention the Resurrection many times, such as the Fourteenth station which says in part: "that through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection; for his merits, who died, and was buried, and rose again for us, the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen" (collect for Easter Eve).

The scriptural simplicity, the obvious reflection of Christ's love and in his passion and the personal moments of acceptance or denial, confronts all who face the challenge of the divine: "Is it nothing to you, all ye who pass by?" (Lamentations 1:12).

Pilate literally washes his hands, and metaphorically absolves himself of his responsibility. Christ meets his mother, but must leave her behind on the road to Golgotha in order to meet his destiny as the redeemer of mankind. Christ falls three times on the way to his crucifixion presaging the three days in the tomb before the Resurrection. Each event is redolent with significance, and each gesture is part of that event.

This version of the 14 stations is not bound by the constraints of historical time or space. Chris Woods not only places those events and people in the present, he transforms Georgia Street into the Via Dolorosa, thereby implicating us all. Christ is condemned on the steps of the old courthouse and he is crucified against the Vancouver skyline. His tormentors are not the remote soldiers of the Roman Empire; they are the anonymous men in suits of corporate capitalism. Christ's friends and followers do not resemble the ethereal saints of tradition as much as they do the tangible, fallible inhabitants of the world around us.

The spontaneous way one of the Roman soldiers stretches the sleeve of Christ's robe against his own arm, trying it for size, is not part of the traditional imagery but conveys the man's insensitivity as much as the more conventional dice the other soldier hold (Station 10). In contrast, Christ's gesture blessing the daughters of Jerusalem (Station 8) is a standard element, part of his frightening benediction as he tells them not to weep for him, but for themselves and for the children because "the days are coming, in which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps that never gave suck." (Luke 23:29) Other gestures, like the ferocious grimace on the face of the soldier who drives the spike through Christ's hand (Station 11), seem horribly fresh and natural, but in fact exactly the same expression and pose characterise his cruelty in hundreds of earlier paintings of the scene.

The Way of the Cross is a story told entirely through gesture, and the entire narrative of Christ's last hours has been distilled into 14 telling moments, some of them scriptural and some not. The richness and significance of the story depend on these moments being "read" and understood by those who see these paintings. This understanding depends on more than the mere recognition of expected traditional elements of the story, although that is necessary. Their power depends rather on the ability of the scenes to convey a sense of the significance of the events before us. We need to recognise the three times that Christ falls under the weight of his cross to notice how their attitude toward Jesus changes from contempt to compassion. Mere repetition of gestures made commonplace by traditional art lulls us into complacency equal to that of the artists who paint them without re-examination.

Chris Woods makes an old tale seem familiar and strange at the same time. A story distant in time is happening right here and right now. These paintings seem even closer and more current because they have the bright colours and the close-up look of photographs rather than the mellow atmosphere of paintings. The scenes themselves are the ones we know, all the elements are there, but they have been re-invented in a fusion of old and new gestures that reopens a place for us in the traditional narrative. It is Woods' understanding of gesture and meaning and his passion for narrative that has opened that space.