

Gillaine and I were at school together and met up again whilst I was doing my pre-ordination retreat. Being able to share in these paintings is a real gift to us during Holy Week.

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Paintings and Reflections for Holy Week 2020

This series of paintings is a precious legacy that was gifted to me by my father, Paul Robertson, to use in my ministry. He originally painted them (along with many, many other such treasures) as an aide to worship and reflection at St Patrick's, Wallington, where I grew up and where my parents still worship. Over the last dozen years, this Holy Week journey has been offered in a variety of settings as a focus for prayer, retreat and meditation.

This year, my hope is that this set of pictures and reflections will help us journey into the mystery of the cross and resurrection from our homes, where we are currently in lockdown, due to Covid-19. You may want to use them for a few minutes or an entire day, or anything in between.

May we each encounter Jesus in new ways as we take this journey together,
Gillaine

Reverend Gillaine Holland

About the Artist:

Paul Michael Robertson was born in 1931 in Beddington, Surrey, he attended Wimbledon Art School from 1947 - 1951 and then the London Institute of Education from 1951 - 1952. Following National Service, Paul taught in Secondary and Higher Education until he retired in 1989.

Throughout his life, Paul has exhibited in local shows and sold privately throughout the country. Paul paints mainly from observation, memory and imagination, loving the textures and patterns of nature and the effects of light and shadow. In his paintings of Christian themes, he seeks mostly to express the feelings (rather than the appearances) of the subject, using textures, colours and abstracted images to powerful effect.

Paul lives in Wallington with Pauline, his wife of sixty seven years, with whom he shares his passion for art. Further work can be viewed at www.paulrobertsonartist.co.uk but please do not try to contact him through his website. If you have an interest in his work, then email me at: rev.gillaine.holland@stmichaelssheerwater.org.uk

These paintings are definitely not for sale but you are welcome to print the pictures for your own use -with acknowledgement to my father.

The following notes are offered as a way into each of the paintings. Use what is helpful and discard what is not:

- Find a quiet space and let anyone who lives with you know that you want some time alone.
- Nobody prays well if they are uncomfortable! You are invited to be attentive to your body: sit in a chair that is supportive with both feet on the ground and your hands relaxed on your lap.
- Take a moment to breathe deeply and become present to yourself and to God.
- When you are ready, invite God to be in your looking and thinking.

Come Holy Spirit;

fill my heart with your love as I look.

Father, guide me as I contemplate.

Give me courage and curiosity as I explore.

Let me hear you speaking, Jesus, and sense your presence with me.

Amen.

- Spend time carefully looking at each painting. Give your attention to all you see. Look at the colours, shapes, patterns, details and notice the many symbols hidden in each image. Don't rush. There is time.
- Notice what you are drawn to and spend time there.
- What do you notice that is familiar from your understanding of the story represented?
- What do you notice (perhaps for the first time) that surprises you or takes you into a new relationship with the story?
- Notice how you feel about the painting. Can you describe your emotional reactions?
- Where might **you** be found in the painting?
- What does the painting mean for you right now – in your life?
- What might God be saying to you through the painting?
- How would you respond?

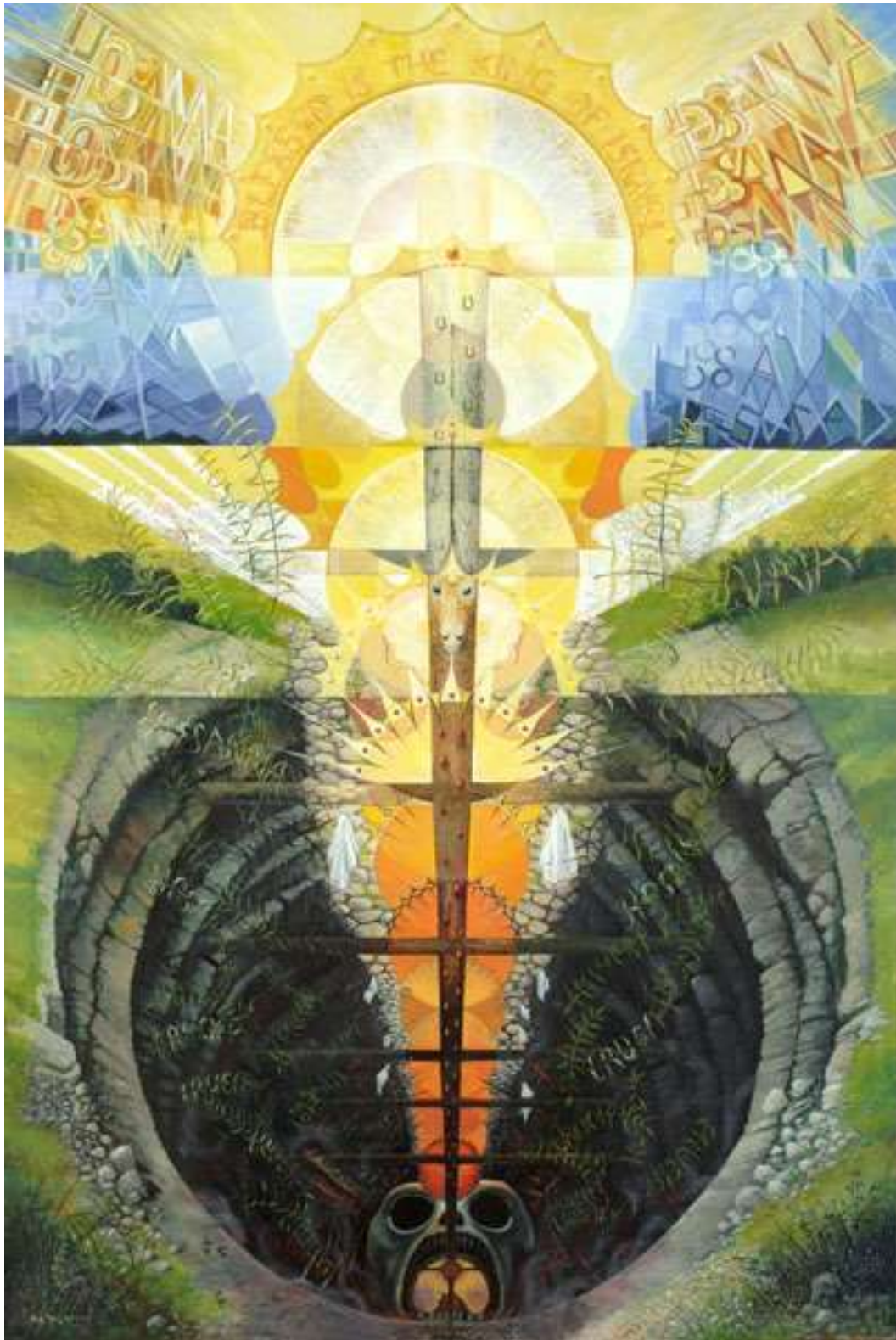
Your response might be written, drawn, spoken or unspoken. It might be modelled, knitted or gardened, glued, crocheted or cooked! Find whatever you would like to use to respond with or sit in silence.

Wait in silence and rest in the presence of God.

I have also provided a short reflection on each painting to help you find a way in but I would encourage you to turn to this last: after doing your own looking and praying so that God's unique message to **you** isn't coloured by my thinking.

For Palm Sunday and Monday of Holy Week (5 & 6 April)

'Entry'



Entry

We begin with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday): The mood changes as Jesus moves purposefully from the open countryside (Luke 7:16 & 17) where he has a huge following (Luke 5:11 & 15) to set his face towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Traditionally, you go 'up' to Jerusalem but this is a spiritual journey of descent which starts at the top of the image where 'hosannas' echo in the air. 'Hosanna' means save us or help us. Bright halos of gold crown the beginning of the path down, where we can see the little hoof marks of the young donkey that carries Jesus into the city. White lines of the plentiful harvest that Jesus commented on (Luke 10:2) join the path, which slowly deepens in colour and descends into the confines of a dark tunnel. The circular sun shapes repeat downwards representing the Son who willingly descended for us. The branches and leaves spelling out 'Hosanna' (Mark 11:9) change to 'Crucify' (Mark 15:13) as they fall into the pit. The dark night of the soul approaches. The crown of glory gradually morphs into the crown of thorns. Shining gold becomes a more threatening red. The paths, rocky ground and brambles are reminders of the dangers in the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3ff). As we descend, the path becomes a cross spattered with droplets of blood. At the pit of the tunnel awaits the gaping mouth of the skull – Golgotha.

I wonder where we are in this journey downwards? Even though the weather has begun to turn and there is spring growth in our land, the bright skies of celebration seem a long way behind us. Yet, as I write, this is only week 2 of what looks to be at least 12 weeks of lockdown. As a nation we have had to deliberately set our faces towards a steep descent into isolation. Unlike Jesus, we have been forced to step onto that dark and bloody ladder and to stare death in the face. How extraordinary then, to understand that Jesus willingly chose that journey ahead of us. He descended to a place of isolation, abandonment and death. He did it so that no matter how deep this tunnel proves to be, we can know that there is a God who trod the path first in human form; a God who promises to tread this path with us again so that we do not have to walk alone; a God who will show us the way. This is the God we Christians proclaim: a God who walked willingly into the very mouth of death and yet was raised.

It is too early in this traumatic journey to talk about resurrection. We are still on the way down. Each day brings rising numbers of unnamed people affected by Covid-19 and yet each one was made in the image of God and is known completely by their Creator. The journey of Holy Week gives us a place to put the very real fears and anxieties of this season and calls us to trust that there is something ahead, beyond what we can currently see.

For Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week (7 & 8 April)

'Cleansing'



Cleansing

Here we witness the explosive effect of Jesus going into the temple to clear out all those who are abusing the system (Matt 21:10-17). He angrily denounces the greed and overbearing regulations that have perverted God's plan for what should be a house of prayer (Isa 47:1ff). Jesus overturns the table, scattering the livestock, their skeletal owners and the money they're collecting at the expense of the poor. 9 sheep run away but 1 returns to show gratitude (cf Luke 17:12ff). The little lamb stands without fear in front of the blazing white-hot fury of Jesus Christ, reminding us that Jesus will become the sacrificial lamb as this week unfolds. In the bottom centre of the picture, water flows according to Ezekiel's vision of the temple (Ezek 47:1ff). Prison doors fly open to set captives free (Luke 4:18) and furniture legs (bottom centre) form a reminder of the Crucifixion. All is scattered.

I don't know how you experience anger. It's often painted as something that good Christians (especially us women) shouldn't feel. Yet, surely, when faced with injustice, suffering, greed and abuse, anger is the only right response? Anger can be our friend (not a nice one) but one that tells us something deep and important is going on. Injustice makes me angry. People stuffing their shopping trollies with too much food when my dad, who painted these pictures, can't get an internet delivery aged 89, makes me angry. Stories of money-grabbing opportunists pretending to be neighbourly, before stealing shopping money from house-bound people make me angry. Whilst this disease is indiscriminate, touching rich and poor alike; you can bet that if you happen to come from one of the poorer parts of the world, your chances of dying are much, much higher than mine – and that makes me angry. There is a long and noble history of angry prayer in the Bible. God seems to encourage and even welcome honest and open dialogue from God's people. It's good to know that even Jesus expresses rage.

Perhaps as disbelief gives way to anger at this virus, at our situation, at suffering and death, we might find a way to move into this painting and show up at our house of prayer in magnificent fury, denouncing all that is deathly and evil, clearing our place of prayer so that, like that one lamb, we might stand face to face with the one who shares our anger and trust in the one who fully intends to do something about the situation.

For Maundy Thursday (9 April)

'Eucharist'



Eucharist

A stylised view of the last supper, rich with symbols from that evening's events: the water bowl for foot-washing, the prominent blood-red cup, the broken bread, bitter herbs from the Passover feast. Jesus himself is stylised in the form of both a cross and a 7-branch temple Menora (candlestick) reminding us that he is both the Light of the World and the one who replaces the need for further sacrifices in the temple. Judas, his cup knocked over, leans away from the temple and the skeletal figure melts away through the door and into the night. The Mandala (oval) is the traditional shape for showing Jesus in glory. His disciples have a share in this; they are enveloped in their own Mandala of light. The buildings of Jerusalem spell out the familiar words of institution.

The disciples, gathered around Jesus for the annual Passover meal, probably had little idea they would not eat this meal with Jesus again – not until the great heavenly feast (Luke 22:15ff). I guess most of us had our last supper similarly unaware that it was to be our last, for a while at least. Bread taken and blessed, broken and shared with wine outpoured, is the basis of our weekly worship. Rich with Passover story, God's people celebrate their freedom from the slavery of sin, recalling both the first Passover story that set the Hebrew slaves free from Pharaoh and the Crucifixion-Resurrection story, which sets us free from even death itself. The sudden shutting down of public worship, the end of our physical meeting, has robbed us of more than we can express. This Maundy Thursday we will not be able to gather around food to retell the stories of faith, to re-enact foot-washing, to break bread and drink wine. How might we lament our loss in this season and how might we be nourished in other ways? What will feed your faith in this season? Can we feast on the word, the story itself, our Scriptures?

One way you might like to do that, is to watch 'Out of Egypt' on the Youtube link below. Brain-child of composer James West, scripted by Jay Whittaker and directed by Audrey Hofmeyr, this musical production involved a whole church effort from Christ Church Guildford, just before I moved on. My entire family are in it and despite that, it's really rather good! It follows the story of Moses from baby in the bulrushes, through the discovery of who he is and his calling from God, right through the plagues and the final Exodus from Egypt. If we watch it in the early evening (pausing to clap the NHS at 8pm) then we can meet afterwards on Zoom at 8.30pm for a conversation and a final prayer before we head into Good Friday. Here's the link to the show:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?feature=share&v=yEXc1ed9YKQ>

Enjoy!

For Maundy Thursday or Good Friday (9 & 10 April)

'Betrayal'



Betrayal

The dominant symbol is the cup shape, standing for suffering (Luke 22:42 & 44) which also becomes the pathway of the Gethsemane garden. As it encloses the disciples (indicated by 11 rings/haloes) it is also a reminder of the intimate fellowship of the last supper. At the base of the cup, the solid mine-like circle shows Judas leading the soldiers to Jesus (John 18:2-3.)

It has been said that you can only be betrayed by a friend. Betrayal is a breach of trust and we can put our trust in more than just friends. A sense of betrayal is normal in the cycle of grief and loss – How could they leave us? How could they do that to us? In this larger circle of grief, a sense of betrayal is also normal but who do we feel betrayed by? Questions have been raised about the speed of China's response to the Covid-19 crisis and to our national shame, we have witnessed a rise in racist behaviour towards the Chinese. The Government has come under fire for not providing enough protective equipment, enough financial support, a quick enough lockdown. When people suffer and die, we look for people to blame, to pass our anger on to.

Judas betrayed his friend Jesus. He offered him up to those who wanted to harm him for just 30 pieces of silver. Was it just greed? He apparently had his hand in the common purse on a regular basis. Was it disappointment? Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah/Saviour he was looking for. Maybe he felt betrayed by Jesus?

Whatever the motive, Jesus stands and receives the kiss of a friend and refuses to allow the rest of his friends to defend him. He chooses to accept the betrayal square on and not to retaliate; not to let anger or bitterness eat away at him. Much easier said than done. In my experience, forgiveness is a lengthy business; a decision to put aside the normal human response and to ask God to help us. It cannot be rushed.

Perhaps this painting can help us explore our own betrayals and to consider where we are on that journey. It is ok to pause here, in this sharp-edged garden, a place of anger and strife, and to know that we are not ready to be quite as brave as Jesus – not yet.

For Good Friday's hours at the cross (9 April)

'Scourging'



Scourging

This disturbing image of pain take us beyond the brutality of the flogging Jesus received (John 19:1-3 and Matt 27:27-31) and moves us into an image which expresses the agonies felt for all the suffering inflicted in our world. The red ribbons of blood might also be the tattered scarlet robe which was put on him, along with the crown of thorns on his head, to mock his kingship. As darkness closes in from the edges of the painting, the light of the world is being dimmed before us.

We may we feel that we are suffering (and so we are) but this image reminds us that there is nowhere we can go, nothing we can experience that has not been fully experienced by Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that the club banging on Jesus' head feels a bit like the nation's screen headache, most of us are not suffering like this. Our freedom has been curtailed. We miss our social circles. We are limited in what we can do. Perhaps for us, this offers some perspective. There are, however, many who would understand this image of pain: those trapped in violent homes, those watching loved ones die, those in parts of the world where lockdown means no food and actually watching your children starve. Can this image disturb us into action? For those of us who have a secure income, who might we bless and help today? Who needs our prayers? Who needs to know that Jesus stands with them today?

Then might we return to the image of kingship that this picture offers us? What kind of leader is this Jesus? What does he require of our own leadership of others in response to this image? Whether we are leaders or followers or both at once, this is a challenging model of what it is to be in charge and to follow Christ in these times.

For Good Friday's hours at the cross (9 April)

'Affliction'



Affliction

'Affliction' seeks to present an image we will recoil from. The thorns viciously snake around the naked eye at the centre of the figure and cause us to flinch. The imagery is jarring and jagged and takes us beyond the usual delicate images of Christ's death on the cross. The pointed nails pierce hands in such a way that the hands themselves mirror and multiply the blade of the nails. Jesus' ribcage is exposed, his side pierced and any light in the painting comes from the hellish fire building from the bottom of the painting. This is evil's day: Caught in a web of spikey, coiling tendrils, Jesus takes on the full force of all that is wrong in the world and in us, every act of rebellion against God from creation through to the end of history.

Here, we must stare in horror and wonder at the love that brought Jesus to this place. Replacing the pure white lamb from our first painting, Jesus becomes the lamb of the world, making the final sacrifice for us all.

For Good Friday's hours at the cross (9 April)

'Crucifixion'



Crucifixion

After the excruciating pain of the previous paintings, this image gives way to the pervading sense of desolation as the 3 hours at the cross draw to a close. The place of the skull, Golgotha, waits for its next victims. Its tombstone teeth remind us that many met their death here at the hands of the Romans.

In his final moments, flanked by 2 criminals (one repentant and the other not), Jesus cries out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' The moment Bonhoeffer describes as when God became an atheist. (Mark 15:33-34). Jesus felt abandoned by God and yet God was present. How could God be otherwise? When clouds form and darkness gathers, we say, 'The sun isn't shining!' but it is. We just can't see it. It has brought me great comfort to know that even Jesus experienced that sense of abandonment by God. Not even God's own son was able to see his Father at all times.

After the drama and the betrayal, the violence and the pain, here we have those final moments many of us have witnessed when life ebbs away and all is still. Even the very painting seems to cry. It is finished. Not just the torture, the pain and the crucifixion but the task Jesus set out to complete. It doesn't look like much of an accomplishment – not yet – but like the women who witnessed this brutality, we must wait and see.

For Low Saturday (11 April)

'Burial'



Burial

'Burial' takes us below the mourning figures of the women, into the mouth of the tomb, where the body of Jesus rests within the well of a lift shaft – or is that a throat? It is a reminder that he descended to the dead. The hopelessness of Hades, and the futility of humanity without God, is expressed by the twisted and broken ladders and stairways that lead nowhere. A power starts to work in the burial place on the left and life returns to some of the dead (Matt 27:52-53.) In the top right hand corner a new order is foretold by the splitting of the temple walls (Matt 27:51).

Whilst the events leading up to and including the crucifixion are easily imaginable, and we can easily identify with the mourners in their numb helplessness, we have very little to help us understand what happened between Good Friday and that first Easter morning.

I remember a story I was told in church one year: a teacher asked the class what they thought Jesus was doing in the place of the dead in those days. A small boy said, 'He went to get his friend back!' Judas betrayed Jesus. Surely, if anyone deserved to remain in death's clutches it was him? Yet, I find the idea that even Judas might be forgiven a reassuring one. Realising what he'd done, he went and hung himself. Judas undoubtedly regretted his betrayal but thought it was too late to sort out. It may have been too late for any action on his part but I like to imagine Jesus arriving at the gates of death and with an almighty kick, breaking them into splinters as he yells, 'It's ok – I'm coming for you!' I want that to be true because if, on this day, he's coming for Judas, then he's also coming for me and for you but for now we wait...

For Easter (12 April and beyond)

'Resurrection'



Resurrection

A rainbow shaft of light bursts up from the deep, radiating pure light from the risen Lord Jesus Christ. We see, on the right of the chasm, the melting of the grip of death and, to the left, the dawning of a new heaven and earth. Blazing glory, circles of light and life; here is what we have been waiting for – death has been defeated. Read the story for yourself in John 20.

Whilst we may be stuck in our homes and unable to celebrate Easter in our church buildings, nonetheless, Easter comes. Like the sun, that may or may not seem to shine today, Jesus is risen. How will you celebrate today? How will you show your gratitude for what God has done? How will you bear witness to what God has birthed in you for this season?

Alleluia. Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia.