

# Stations of the Cross

Each: (approx) 34 x 28 x 6cm

Anastasis: 76 x 45cm

*Wood, rags, acrylic binder & Indian ink, acrylic & oil paint*

In May '08 I was commissioned by Fr. Abbot to make a replacement for the existing set of Stations in our cloister. The idea was to try the new biblical version used by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI on Good Fridays at the Colosseum. I began work that June and finished in July '09.

Prior to this commission I had been in no hurry to undertake any explicitly religious artwork, preferring to work within the remit of modern painting. The problem as I see it being that much church art from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards has fallen into the trap of trying to amalgamate traditionalism and Modernism without taking into account the uneasy relationship between them. Many works being a take on traditional Christian iconography in a modern *style*, the two elements gratuitously amalgamated without any inner integrity. The options, for the kind of art I wanted to do seemed, thus, to be a choice between taking up traditional iconography, as many have, or simply to remain within contemporary practice. Despite post graduate studies in the former, I had already had too much formation in the latter for long term change.

I had initially taught myself to draw by making comic strips, which has remained a constant characteristic of my work ever since. This genre has a range from *Mr. Men* to *Metal Hurlant*. My own work, initially inspired by the American underground comic movement, moved from pen and ink to painting and relief sculpture. An obvious difference between narrative mediaeval art and the comic strip is that the latter would unfold more in the way of a film story board with close-ups, creative camera angles and more 'frames per second'. I deliberately chose to conform to the perspective of the former, more like a series of miniature theatrical tableaux, in order to maintain an element of continuity with that tradition.

I decided to use a technique I had been working on for relief sculpture that I had initially worked out as a cheap substitute for impasto. This involves soaking rags in acrylic binder and allowing them to dry stuck to a board or canvas. This dries hard and can take further paint treatments. It creates a satisfyingly grotesque high relief. It was important for me to retain the character of the materials in the work so that any given figure can be seen at once as what it is (rag) *and* for what it depicts (e.g. a human form). Truth to materials. The relief cross shape of these Stations is derived, as much as anything, from miniature carvings in boxwood I have seen made by Greek Orthodox monks. The 15<sup>th</sup> and last is a version of the traditional Byzantine *Anastasis* (Resurrection) or *Harrowing of Hell* which is bit larger than the other Stations and fits over our lady chapel door in the shape of a tympanum arch.

But does it work? I learned as I went along. When I began I had no clear idea how I would do the unclothed human figure in this medium for instance. There is much in these Stations that must be regarded as contingent, a series of design solutions. There are arguably more creative possibilities in this than in something more finished.

This work is sculpture. This means that the pictorial elements are necessarily three dimensional. The painted highlights are a concession to legibility. Even so, it has been suggested that the narrative is hard to read, the forms obscured in dark complex textures. If this is so then I can recommend my own practice of contemplating patterns in woodgrain, marbling or linoleum. In due course faces and figures emerge.

# Commentary

## I. Jesus in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane



Jesus is the figure on the top of the mound to the left, he has covered his face in prayer. The sleeping disciples are lower down to the right, similarly draped. Between them is a tree. At the top, the arm of the angel holding the cup of Jesus' passion. Beneath Jesus is a miniature Transfiguration scene because it features the same players and is the positive of which this is the negative. Below, the gaping Pit, indicating the fears of Jesus.

II. Jesus is betrayed, arrested and deserted



Lower centre, under two trees, Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. Bottom right, the arresting party with torches & clubs. Bottom left, the young man of Mark (14:52) flees naked.

### III. Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin



In a kind of dock at the bottom, Jesus faces the Sanhedrin with his back to us. The Sanhedrin sit over him in a semi circle with Caiaphas at the top. There are seven of them, this indicates that they sit in the seat of Moses. I have given them grotesque insect heads, not because I regard clergy as inhuman but because they are acting inhumanly in this instance. They are grouped around a kind of super insect head whose jaws form Jesus' nimbus.

#### IV. Jesus is denied by Peter



I have set this scene in a courtyard of surreal towers. At the bottom the serving girl (right) confronts Peter (left). There is a brazier between them (cf. Lk 22:55). Two temple guards watch far left. Just above them, slightly to the right, Jesus can be discerned in a tower looking down at Peter. Above and behind the towers, top left, is a cock on a pillar.

V. Jesus appears before Pilate



Pilate is seated between Jesus (left) and Barabbas (right). You can always tell Jesus by his cruciform nimbus, this being the normal iconographic tradition for both East and West. Behind them, the pillars of the governor's palace. Attached to the pillar behind and above Pilate are the Imperial regalia. On the floor by Pilate's feet are a basin and a towel for washing his hands. Beneath is the crowd crying 'crucify him'. Note that there is a sixth shouting head behind the front row of five.

VI. Jesus is scourged & crowned with thorns



It was necessary to include two scenes in this station so I left it until last. On the left we see Jesus tied to the central pillar being flogged. On the right two soldiers mock him seated with the crown of thorns. Over Jesus' head is a window showing mount Calvary. At the bottom Pilate skulks off through the basement.

VII. The Cross is placed on Jesus' shoulders



Jesus is at the bottom of a winding path leading up to Golgotha, accompanied by two soldiers, where the crucified thieves await Him. The dwellings on the left designate Jerusalem.



VIII. Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene to carry the Cross



On a point on the Via Dolorosa Jesus (left) hands over the cross to Simon (right) who turned out to be wearing something that resembles a Benedictine cowl. The monastic vocation. At the bottom another Simon, also called Peter, who helped Jesus bear the cross in his own way.

IX. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem



Jesus pauses on the path to make his prophecy to the women. Simon struggles on with the cross on the far right. The scenes behind illustrate the prophesy of Luke 23:28ff. Above Jesus on the left, is a hill with a green tree, on the right a hill with a dead tree; top centre, a future vision of the sack of Jerusalem.

X. Jesus is crucified



The soldier on the ladder is nailing Jesus to the cross. Below two soldiers gamble for his garment.

## XI. Jesus promises Paradise to the Good Thief



The three crosses are set over a notional 'Paradise', an idyllic mountains and valleys scene. This features Jesus entertaining the good thief below right, above the crosses to the right is a kind of Jerusalem on a hill. Above the crosses on the hill to the left the three tabernacles proposed by Peter to Jesus at the Transfiguration to indicate the fulfillment of what he was groping for at that time. At the top the hand of God blesses. The good thief seems to be on Jesus' left (our right) whereas he should be on his right (cf. Mt. 25).

XII. Jesus entrusts the beloved Disciple to his Mother



This is quite faithful to the traditional Orthodox and mediaeval Catholic icon of the scene. Including in the crevasse at the bottom the skull of Adam.

### XIII. Jesus dies on the Cross



Starting from the top, the curtain of the temple torn in two. Below that, just above Jesus' left hand is the sun darkened. In the centre to our left the centurion and behind him a soldier ready with a spear to pierce Jesus' side. To the right the Beloved Disciple records the scene (cf. Jn 19:35). Below saints begin to emerge from the tomb (cf. Mt 27:52).

XIV. Jesus is taken down from the Cross and placed in the tomb



Above, a traditional Pietá. Opposite the tomb entrance, the two Marys of Matthew & Mark. Below, inside the tomb.

## XV. Anastasis



Or The Harrowing of Hell. An interpretation of the canonical Eastern Orthodox icon for the Resurrection. '*Anastasis*': literally '*standing again*'. Jesus descends into Hell (or Sheol) on Holy Saturday and releases the captives. The scene is derived from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. Traditionally Jesus is rescuing Adam and Eve and other Old Testament saints, such as Abel and King David. The medium of strips of rag lent itself to boney sinewy figures resembling victims of a modern atrocity, or just a take on the human condition. These characters do not fit into any religious category, they are just anybody. Not necessarily in Hell, but as we are now.



Anastasis in Situ



Installation

