

Views from the Pews – Painting Mary

Last week we saw Kathleen Peterson's 'Mary and Baby Jesus'. The artist is American, with strong links to Mormonism. This week, we might look at Colin McCahon's 'The Marys at the Tomb' painted in the year before Peterson was even born. It is generally thought that McCahon is drawing on Mark Chapter 16, although Mark's young man in a white robe is flying angelically overhead rather than sitting inside as the Gospel describes him.

McCahon did a number of expressly biblical paintings – all featuring Mary – which are famous because they fuse two distinct (even foreign) elements, European religious imagery and New Zealand landscape.

The tomb painting features McCahon's memory of a Marlborough landform, carrying upon it what we instantly recognize as late Medieval/ early Renaissance images. Note for instance the outstretched forefinger. But the stone casket could double as a concrete water trough on any New Zealand farm, and those hills do not belong in Tuscany.

It would be premature and presumptuous to label McCahon as specifically 'Christian' so we'll limit ourselves to what we know; he was surrounded by spiritually aware family and friends, he was familiar with religious imagery, and he was aware of scripture's power. He frequently used scriptural quotations in his art.

What he may have been saying in his three most famous depictions of Mary is however something potentially quite profound. It is suggested here that he is saying that God (acting through His earthly agents) is everywhere, even over Takaka, where the Annunciation takes place.

This important especially for we Anglicans, and for Roman Catholics, because so much of our religious imagery is European, and particularly English in our case. Maori imagery helps of course, but so many of our churches still specifically reference Victorian architecture and decoration.

Is McCahon telling us that God doesn't live in England, or Rome, but here? We give lip service to this idea, but our imagery – which speaks powerfully to anyone new to Church – seems to say otherwise.

Hamish Keith wrote of his first encounter with the Marys thus; 'I knew that Jesus was not entombed anywhere in the vicinity of Christchurch and it was a shock that somebody could so convincingly make it seem he was'. (Many assumed at the time that the landscape was Cantabrian).

Art and music have much to say about faith. Get to know McCahon's three 'Mary' works if you can.

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