

Views from the Pews – Victory over death

A quick return to Colin McCahon's work needs no apology. 'Victory over Death2' hangs in the Australian National Gallery as a gift from the NZ Government.

<https://mccahonhouse.org.nz/100/nick-mitzevich/> Many found – and still find – this a challenging work, consisting largely of white words on a dark background. Critical consensus is largely this:

1. The words come from John 12:27-36, and are the artist's response to a complex piece of scripture. McCahon was drawn to this on several occasions, this passage following the 'grain of wheat' metaphor in 12:24, which Jesus would have used with an audience all too familiar with the consequences of crop failure. The painting is literally art as theology.

2. The artist was struggling with lack of recognition and/or mockery. Perhaps he had an inkling of the effect alcohol use would have on his life, and wanted to create a body of work which might be misunderstood in his lifetime, but which would be recognized after his death. He was probably painting for our and our children's generations, rather than for 1970s New Zealand. He was painting for the long term – painting pictures that would find life only after the artist's death.

We are being asked to wonder whether it is not just the good works we do in our lifetime, but also our focus on the long term, on the effects our work may have after death. Yes, we need to live a Godly life, but does that living end with earthly death? Or are we called to conquer death by means of a legacy?

Imagine if you have poor eyesight and compromised balance. You do not walk as confidently as before. Imagine then a new sort of footpath, designed with you in mind, one which restores confidence and freedom. This footpath may well be the legacy of a parishioner we farewelled recently.

We all have the opportunity to leave a legacy. St John again, at 3:16, has Christ reassuring us that death will be defeated by belief. Let there be no doubt, belief includes action, action not just today or tomorrow, but over the long term. We can all plan long-term for a society that may not yet exist, for needs that may not have yet arisen, for situations as yet unforeseen. Others may mock, but to take control of tomorrow, which is the essence of Jesus' death, is an opportunity not to be missed.

Richard Swarbrick