

Truro Cathedral Reredos

– A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Truro Cathedral

Introduction

I have a long personal fascination with this magnificent reredos, both as a focus for prayer and as a source of theological inspiration. If I am honest I think that our written material, and I guess our spoken explanations too, have failed to interpret it in a satisfactory way and I offer this talk merely as a starting point for further exploration. This is what the reredos means to me, not necessarily precisely what Pearson may have intended, but I hope along similar lines so far as the principal emphases are concerned.

We need to acknowledge that the existing explanatory panel is largely although not totally accurate (as Eric Dare's helpful paper of 1996 points out), but it merely describes what is included, without trying to offer an explanation as to what it all might mean. Elsewhere the reredos is described as being 'on the theme of sacrifice', and while sacrifice is an important theme, I don't believe that it is the only theme, and certainly it isn't the guiding principle for the work as a whole. We must begin by seeking this out, and by trying to relate the reredos to the carvings in the sanctuary screen which are an integral part of the whole enterprise, and especially to what is above and absolutely crucially to what is below the reredos itself.

The principal theme – the Eucharist



What is below the reredos? – the High Altar. The reredos is designed to be in this place relating to an Altar, and that is crucial in seeking to understand it. My chief claim today is that the overarching theme of the reredos is actually the Eucharist. That is what the Altar is for – the celebration of the mystery of the Eucharist, and the reredos helps us to contemplate several aspects of that mystery. We need to recall that thinking about what the Eucharist meant was one of

the key parts of the late Nineteenth century Oxford Movement within the Church of England, a movement that profoundly affected Pearson. The Oxford Movement was obviously about other things too: in looking back across the centuries to the pre-Reformation Church it sought to capture something of that earlier way of being a Christian: the sense of the church as a spiritual reality separate from the state; the rediscovery of pre-Reformation forms of worship (sometimes described as 'High Church'); and of course the Gothic Revival in architecture and so much more. But a key theme was a theological one: the recovery of much older ways of thinking about the nature of the Church, its ministry and its sacraments, and especially what Christians should believe about the Eucharist.

We need several hours even to begin to take in the complex history of belief about the Eucharist from the earliest times until now, so trying to explain the issues in about two minutes will not be a nuanced presentation. Please forgive the brutal over-simplification. From the earliest days of the Church right up to the end of the Middle Ages in England, the

Eucharist or Mass had become more and more an elaborate rite performed by the clergy, in which Christ the perfect victim was offered to his Father as a propitiatory sacrifice for his Church, and specifically for the souls of the departed. Chantry chapels were set up where regular Masses could be offered for one particular benefactor or cause.

Then came the Reformation, in a fairly radical form in parts of Reformed Europe (e.g. in Geneva, and in Scotland), and in a less thoroughgoing way elsewhere in Lutheran Europe and here in England. Together with a new discovery of the Bible in the vernacular, the encouragement of married clergy, and the severing of ties with the Pope, to mention just three out of a long list of important changes, a major issue for the Reformers had to do with the interpretation of the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper as they often called it. That term is significant – they were trying to get back to what they believed the origins of the service to be, a simple meal shared by believers to remember Christ, and in which they could receive him through faith with thanksgiving.

So when the late medieval priest spoke of 'Do this in remembrance of me' he was referring to elevating the host for adoration and to offer Christ to the Father. When the reformer spoke of 'Do this in remembrance of me' he was referring to eating bread and drinking wine together as a fellowship meal that linked us with Christ.

The theologians of the Oxford Movement looked back nostalgically to that earlier view of the Eucharist, and sought more and more to reintroduce it into the mainstream thought of the Church of England. They would argue that it was still perfectly possible to hold on to the insights of the Reformation – the Eucharist as fellowship meal, while also wanting to say much more about the Eucharist in ways that were much closer to the beliefs of the Middle Ages. And here in stone is one of the most powerful statements I know of that kind of thinking, placed in the most prominent position in this remarkable building, immediately above the principal altar. And it says to us: 'If you want to understand what is going on here week by week, or at the other altars of the Cathedral day by day, then here are some clues as to what the Eucharist really means'.

Sub-theme 1: The Eucharist is the place where the worship of heaven and earth come together

We need to start by looking again at where the reredos is and to what it relates. Below it is the altar, the focus for our earthly worship of God: above it is the great East Window, a window that speaks about the worship of heaven, drawing on images especially from the Book of Revelation. I'd love to spend an hour just talking about that window, but we must concentrate today on the reredos. So look at the two great central panels (see cover) – the lower depicting Christ on the cross, with his mother on the left as we look at it being comforted, Mary Magdalene kissing Christ's feet, St. John on the right, and the Jews with their headdresses and the Gentile soldiers (including one carrying the INRI inscription to be placed at the head of the cross). And then look above where the same Christ is in glory sharing the worship of heaven, carrying the Book of Life and with his hands blessing his

Church. The message is clear – it is the one who suffered on the cross who now reigns in glory: you cannot look at one panel without the other. To understand Christ's death you have to see beyond it and through it to the glory of heaven, and that glory is only made possible through the suffering of the Son of God.

But now remember the context again – a window of heavenly worship above, the altar beneath. I am sure that we are invited to see the top panel as one with the East Window, for its themes are almost identical; and the lower panel as one with the Altar (and just to strengthen the connection note that the front of the Altar itself is covered with the symbols of the Passion). Just as the two panels belong together in one combined interpretation of the mystery of Christ crucified and in glory, so the earthly worship offered on the altar here, is intrinsically linked with the worship portrayed in the window, the worship of heaven. When we offer the Eucharistic mystery here below we are not merely recalling or anticipating that heavenly worship but actually sharing in it, and the wonder of that perfect worship breaks into the imperfection of our worship here below. This is why we use beautiful objects for the Mass, wear beautiful clothes at it, sing beautiful music to enrich it. It's a way of showing that even now we are sharing in the worship of heaven. And I think the reredos itself gives us a further nudge that we should interpret things in this kind of way – by decorating the niches on either side of the central pillars with pairs of adoring angels, and providing the images of the nine orders of angels in the niches above the Altar. They remind us of the interplay between the worship here and in heaven, and how in the Eucharist we are one with the angels and the archangels in their unending Sanctus. The ancient pre-Reformation Eucharistic prayer, still used as the normative prayer in the Roman Catholic Church, puts it like this:

'Supplices te rogamus, omnipotens Deus, iube haec perferri per manus sancti Angeli tui in sublime altare tuum, in conspectu divinae maiestatis tuae; ut quotquot ex hac altaris participatione sacrosanctum Filii tui Corpus et Sanguinem sumpserimus, omni benedictione caelesti et gratia repleamur.' 'Almighty God, we pray that your angel may take these holy gifts to your altar in heaven. Then, as we receive from this altar the sacred body and blood of your Son, let us be filled with every grace and blessing.'

The Eucharist is the place where the worship of heaven and earth come together and it is closely linked with the second theme:

Sub-theme 2: The Eucharist is the place where we can experience the reality of the risen Christ

The central panels (see cover) juxtapose the reality of Calvary and the reality of the ascended and glorified Christ in heaven, to emphasise that heavenly presence breaking into our lives. In a sense that theme is continued in the carvings elsewhere in the sanctuary. Starting from the North West corner, just inside the communion rail, they tell the story of the appearances of the heavenly Christ from the day of his resurrection – the times when his heavenly glory was manifested to his disciples. So we have the Empty Tomb with Peter and John stooping and looking in; Mary Magdalene with Jesus mistaken for the gardener; the



Empty tomb; Mary Magdalene with Jesus

Road to Emmaus (note the door to the house); the Emmaus meal when Jesus breaks the bread – note that this clearly Eucharistic story is given two panels to emphasise it; the appearance to the ten disciples, not Thomas, with Jesus saying 'Peace be with you'; and the later appearance when Thomas is there, and feeling the wounds of Christ.

Then on the other side, omitting the first two which belong to another sequence, we have the miraculous catch of fishes; the commissioning of Peter with John present; the appearance to the 500 disciples of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 15; the martyrdom of Stephen when he sees Christ in glory; the appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus; and finally the revelation to St. John as the beginning of the book of Revelation – which takes us back to the upper panel of the reredos and the East Window above it. Note that this is not a complete account of the Easter story and the Early Church from Easter Day onwards – there is, for example, no Day of Pentecost, or any interest in other parts of the Acts of the Apostles. The stories chosen are all those in which disciples encounter the risen Christ. And it seems to me that the message is clear – at the heart of this sequence is the altar, where we can meet the risen Christ today in the mystery of the Eucharist.

Sub-theme 3: The Eucharist is the place where our worship is linked with the sacrifice of Christ

I have deliberately played down the importance of sacrifice until now, because I wanted to show you that there was much much more to the reredos than its sacrificial theme. But of course that theme is writ large, not only in the lower central panel showing the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross but also the four main panels on the left of the reredos. In them we are given four Old Testament 'figures' or 'types' of that sacrifice. Just a short explanation about what those words 'figure' and 'type' mean – they are essentially the Latin and Greek words for the same thing. When people in the Early Church meditated upon and studied the stories of the Old Testament, they often interpreted those stories as having several layers of meaning. One of these was the plain simple historical meaning – what happened and what it meant at the time. But as the Church pondered the events of Old Testament history and mythology, it began to read back into those ancient stories something of the story of Christ. God was the same God after all, and had a continuous and consistent plan for the world, so what happened back then must be some kind of preparation for what is happening now, and so when the ancient characters were talking and acting as they did, they were in some sense looking forward to the Christ who was to come. The stories are typological, lesser stories that are looking forward to and foreshadowing the greater events that are to come. The panels on the left of the reredos do this to develop the theme of sacrifice. They take stories of sacrifice from the Old Testament and use them to point forward to the central panel – the one perfect sacrifice made once for the sins of the whole world.

So in the top left we begin with the sacrifice of Abel – the first recorded sacrifice in the Bible. You can see him with his lamb and the angel applauding while Cain with his crops gets no reward. Then we have Noah and his family offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving from some of



The sacrifice of Isaac

the clean animals who have survived the flood with them. Below him is the chilling story of the sacrifice of Isaac, when Abraham was prepared to offer 'his only Son' an idea full of typological possibilities for the Christian interpreter. Finally on the bottom left is the story of the Passover, showing the Israelites eating the Passover lamb in a hurry before they left Egypt, and encouraging us to see the story as a type or figure of Christ the Passover Lamb, whose blood turns away from us the avenging angel of the Passover, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The reredos then deals with the theme of sacrifice, but remember that its principal and overarching theme is to explain the mystery of the Eucharist. All that sacrificial typology invites us to see Calvary as a sacrifice, and so also the Eucharist itself as linked with that sacrifice. Part of the great Reformation debate about the Eucharist was concerned with this idea of sacrifice. In what sense was the Mass a sacrifice? Were we offering Christ to the Father as the medieval teachers affirmed, or was the only sacrifice the one unrepeatable one of Calvary, together with our own puny sacrifice of thanks and praise? That's certainly what Cranmer suggests in the Book of Common Prayer. The thinkers of the Oxford Movement, in this as in so many other ways, wanted to recapture something of that older view. Yes of course Calvary was unrepeatable, but as we offer the Eucharist, our offering of bread and wine and of our lives, that offering is taken up into Christ's eternal offering of himself to the Father, our sacrifice is received in and through that one perfect sacrifice.

You need only to read the Letter to the Hebrews to discover all this sacrificial language in abundance. The writer speaks of a new and better covenant, a new and greater High Priest, a better and unrepeatable sacrifice, and so on that has come in Christ, but he doesn't reject all the sacrificial language itself. Much of the great tradition of the Jewish sacrifices, the ritual and music and incense and colour, was taken up and developed by the early and medieval Church to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ. The Reformation did away with much of that – the sacrificial altars became wooden tables for the fellowship meal- but the Oxford Movement brought much of it back. In this Cathedral the High Altar is a massive marble slab – not a fellowship table, but a place on which to offer the sacrifice of the Mass – and the Altar itself is seen as a particular focus of the crucified Christ, covered now with altarcloths that recall the gravesheets of the resurrection, and which have at each corner the sign of the cross recalling the place of his glorified wounds. All this emphasises that the Eucharist is the place where our worship is linked with the sacrifice of Christ.

Sub-theme 4: The Eucharist is the place where Christ feeds us with himself the Bread of Life

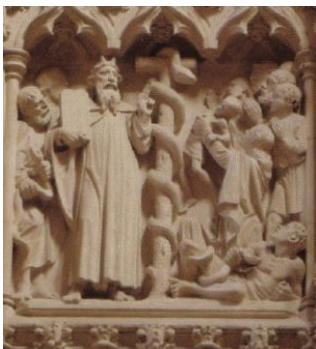
Just as the left panels deal with the theme of sacrifice, so the panels on the right of the reredos, together with those adjacent to them on the sanctuary screen, emphasize the meal aspect of the Eucharist, and how it is that Christ feeds us through its mysteries. It was another emphasis of the Oxford Movement that Christ was truly present in the Eucharistic elements, which is why here and in many churches we reserve the Blessed Sacrament and show our respect by genuflecting before it and when we receive Holy Communion. Again the point is made through Old Testament typology, some of it slightly complex.



The Tree of Life

Starting at the top left we have the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden being defended by an angel. Being barred from it is a sign of our estrangement from God and from the nourishment of his living presence. In the language of Christian devotion, the cross on which Jesus was crucified came to be seen as a tree, and thus a new tree of life. Just as we lost access to the first through the disobedience and fall of Adam, now through the obedience of Christ, the new Adam, we have access to that tree, and thus to eternal life with God. But note too that the tree has grapes - for receiving the gifts of God in Holy Communion is a sharing in that Tree of Life through which Christ feeds us with himself. And the grapes are being gathered, for the tree appears too in the Book of Revelation by the river flowing from the Temple, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations, represented here by the twelve stems, twelve being a Biblical sign of inclusion and completeness (as for the twelve disciples). That's an exceedingly complex bit of typology! This week's post-communion prayer at the Eucharist expresses it all very well:

*God our creator,
by your gift
the tree of life was set at the heart of the earthly paradise,
and the bread of life at the heart of your Church:
may we who have been nourished at your table on earth
be transformed by the glory of the Saviour's cross
and enjoy the delights of eternity;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*



The Brazen Serpent

In the top right we have the brazen serpent set up by Moses so that anyone who had been attacked by real serpents could look on it and be healed. And, to quote St John who was very partial to typology, 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life'. In the wounds of Christ crucified we find our healing, and through the Eucharistic mystery we can know that we are redeemed through the Blood of Christ.

Below on the left we have the Shewbread – the cakes of bread always kept before God in the temple near the Ark of the Covenant, and set up for a memorial every Sabbath Day, just as each Sunday the Bread of Christ’s presence is offered to God in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and we eat of the holy bread as Christ’s priestly people.



The Shewbread



Gathering the Fruit

And below on the right we have the gathering of the First Fruits, the kind of Jewish Harvest Festival. It is not the Gathering of the Manna, as the present sign incorrectly states, for the people are not collecting food from the ground but harvesting their crops. The point of this panel is that we are required to offer our best to God in our worship, and especially in the Eucharistic mystery in which he takes our gifts and offers them back to us transformed into his sacramental presence.



Gathering of the Manna; Water flowing from the rock of Kadesh

Moving along to the panels on the far right of the sanctuary screen, we reach the Gathering of the Manna, the figure or type for ‘the Bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world’ which is the way in which the Christ of St. John describes himself, as we receive him in the Eucharist. The final panel shows the water flowing from the rock at Kadesh after Moses had struck it with his rod, an

episode seen as a foreshadowing of the water flowing from the side of the crucified Christ. The typology of these two panels is brought very movingly together in the hymn ‘Lord enthroned in heavenly splendour’ as we sing to Christ in the Eucharist: ‘Life imparting heavenly manna; Stricken rock with streaming side’

And underneath the stricken rock, almost hidden from view, we have a chalice held by an angel to catch the drops of Christ’s blood, while under the life imparting heavenly manna is a pelican with three chicks, the bird who in mythology feeds her young with her own flesh, even as Jesus feeds us in the Eucharist with himself the bread of life.

Sub-theme 5: The Eucharist is the place where the whole Church, past, present and future are brought together.

I think that this is the point of the tiers of niches throughout the reredos, as well as their aesthetic function of helping to divide the larger panels from one another. Just as heaven and earth touch in the Eucharistic mystery, so does all of time come together in this sacrament as we share a moment of eternity. As we celebrate the Eucharist we are in the company of the prophets who in ages long ago looked forward to the coming of the Lamb of God: you can see them in the outer tiers of niches – on the left from bottom to top: Jeremiah, Joel, Zechariah and Malachi (all but Zechariah carrying his name); and on the right Daniel, Amos (looking like the shepherd he was), Isaiah and Ezekiel. We share too in the fellowship of those who knew Christ in his earthly life – represented by the twelve apostles along the base of the reredos: Philip, with the Latin cross; Jude; James the Less; Matthew with his book; James the Great with his pilgrim hat and staff; Peter with his keys; John with the chalice of the Last Supper; Andrew with the diagonal cross; Bartholomew with the knife (incorrectly labelled Simon on the notice); then Simon; Thomas; and Matthias. And we celebrate too the white-robed army of martyrs, shown in the inner tiers of niches: Edmund, the Christian King of the East Angles, defeated by the Vikings; Cecilia, patron of music and virgin martyr; George, soldier and martyr; and Vincent of Spain with his gridiron. On the other side are Catherine of Alexandria with her wheel; Polycarp the earliest recorded martyr after the Bible linking us with the Apostles shown in the full Eucharistic robes of a Bishop – chasuble, dalmatic and tunic; Lawrence, also martyred on a gridiron; and Alban the Roman soldier who was the first British martyr. So these are not just any collection of saints but specifically martyrs: those whose sacrifice somehow shared in the greater sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the Cross and made present at every Eucharist. So in the words of the ancient Christian hymn the Te Deum:

*'The glorious company of the apostles praise thee;
The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise thee;
The noble army of martyrs praise thee.'*

And in the Eucharist we join our praises with theirs.

Conclusion

That's an awful lot to take in in one session. I'd like to conclude by reading the words of that great Eucharistic hymn to which I referred earlier because so much of what this magnificent reredos represents is found also in the words of that hymn, a hymn written, not surprisingly, at a similar time to the design and construction of the reredos. I wish you well in your interpretation of this theological treasure, and hope that it may inspire you as it has inspired me in my devotion to and my thinking about the Eucharist.

*Lord, enthroned in heavenly splendour
First-begotten from the dead
Thou alone, our strong Defender
Liftest up Thy people's head
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Jesus, true and living Bread*

*Here our humblest homage pay we
Here in loving reverence bow
Here for faith's discernment pray we
Lest we fail to know Thee now
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou art here, we ask not how*

*Though the lowliest form doth veil Thee
As of old in Bethlehem
Here as there Thine angels hail Thee
Branch and Flower of Jesse's stem
Alleluia! Alleluia!
We in worship join with them*

*Paschal Lamb, Thine offering, finished
Once for all when Thou wast slain
In its fulness undiminished
Shall forever more remain
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Cleansing souls from every stain*

*Life-imparting, heavenly Manna
Stricken Rock with streaming side
Heaven and earth with loud hosanna
Worship Thee, the Lamb who died
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Risen, ascended, glorified!*

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