

The image to the far left echoes 'imago Dei' [the Image of God in humanity] in the work of creation, and that same image might evoke also the language of the wisdom literature and the personification of Wisdom in the Divine act of creation. The allusion to chains within this image draws on enslavements and the idolatries of corruption running through the human condition. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade being perhaps the most public for Bristol.

The character of 'gaze' that links across the whole work leads the eye towards a reconciling unity given in communion with the Christ, high above in the stained glass, as well as the Agnus Dei. To the extreme right is the image of Saint Stephen, patron and proto-martyr. In this gaze we see a feature of the narrative in the Acts recording that his accusers "sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel."

Outcomes and Future Story

The whole commitment of this commission has been about engagement. The Community Learning Events are indicative of future responses to the work.

The Gospel Singing Workshops: the four initial workshops so energised the participants that there is a desire to establish the Voice of Hope Choir permanently. This sense of purpose and identity is creating valuable and transforming relations across culture, age and ethnic backgrounds – one of the core aims of the reconciliation project vision.

The Drawing Exchange facilitated by a Bristol artist realised a series of workshops that explored the gifts of the participants and their responses to the building but also the paths of the river and trade in Bristol. There is work ongoing from this than connects with the experience of migrant communities.

The Stone Carving Workshops that drew very diverse groups together, addressed the themes of the work directly, and, have set down in the form of a sculpture installation potentials for artistic aspiration.

The Reconciliation Laboratory meets, as an ongoing enterprise, often beneath the Reredos, and aims to reveal, through its process, ways to handle conflict that rests upon the spirituality articulated in the Reredos. Examples to date include Hospitality and Asylum, The Land – Israel and Palestine.

The potential for work with schools, Tourists/Pilgrims, the business and commercial communities as well as faith communities draws us towards a rich form of engagement between the inheritance that has described the building itself and the faith it represents together with the city community.

The Reconciliation Reredos

The Altar-piece of the City Parish Church of Saint Stephen Bristol



**Four powerful pieces of contemporary artwork, created by
Graeme Mortimer Evelyn**

**transforming the exquisite Victorian stone carving which flanks the
central altar of Bristol's city parish church.**

**Echoing the spirit of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation
Commission, this work is fruit of the city's commemoration of the
Bi-Centenary of the 1807 Act to Abolish the Slave Trade.**

**What follows here is an outline of this story, the work of the artist and
the connections with the wider city community.**

It is an icon in Saint Stephens' mission and a resource for inspiration.

Built to 'serve the spiritual needs of the new community' that flourished following the moving of the River Frome in 1247, Saint Stephen's was the first church to be built outside the medieval city wall and fronting the new harbour. The Age of Discovery and the ventures of ambitious merchants grew Bristol to become second city to London. It was this ambition that energised the Society of Merchant Venturers in their eight year campaign to become equal players with the Royal Africa Company and the Port of London. When they finally broke this monopoly Bristol was set to exploit the 'triangle trade' in human lives. Laden with merchandise, from rum to guns, ships fitted with shackles manufactured for human 'cargo' left Bristol for the coast of West Africa. Trading with the slavers of that region they prepared for the Middle Passage, the sea crossing to

the Americas and West Indies, carrying with them their 'cargo' of human trafficking. The survivors of the voyage were sold in exchange for the produce of the plantations. Then came the rich return run to Bristol, to the sugar houses and tobacco trade. By the height of the Trade in 1730 up to seventy Bristol ships a year added to the wealth that changed the landscape of the city. Saint Stephens church building greeted a radical Georgian enhancement during that period.

This story, however, is not one of total blindness or unfettered greed. The founding of anti-slavery committees, first in London in 1789 and then in Bristol, drew controversial support. One of the clergy of Saint Stephen's, who later became Dean of Gloucester, Josiah Tucker, was such a voice. The Bristol committee and the work of the Clapham sect inspired people like William Wilberforce. Hannah More and Thomas Clarkson linked with Bristol's activism towards Abolition in 1807.

The Artistic vision and commission given in 2009 to Graeme Mortimer Evelyn required commitment to a contemporary expression of the reredos and altar piece tradition. Within this tradition local narrative expresses Christian spirituality and is the vehicle for wisdom and theological insight. The narrative fundamental to the whole project is the mercantile connections that have built the city of Bristol. These connections provide the genre and genesis for the work. Bristol's international and trans-Atlantic perspective is now represented in the communities of the city.

The artist commission was focused in four fertile universal concepts:

Creation

Imago Dei [image of God in humanity]

Reconciliation

Hope.

A key aspect of the process has been the dialogue designed to expose and reflect on these foundational concepts. The working process of the artist has been connected to stories of the city and of local community experience with the programme of Community Learning Events.

Community Learning Events

A series of Community Learning Events was programmed to explore the four focus concepts: Creation, Imago Dei, Reconciliation and Hope. These have underpinned this essential community engagement as a part of the objective of

Saint Stephen's to *re-connect* the whole building to its city community and its faith inheritance.

Themes, Dialogue and Spirituality

Throughout the process the artist was in dialogue with a wide range of people. The pattern of the regular dialogue with the Parish Priest aimed to interrogate the possibility and experience of reconciliation and the person the Christ. Crucial in these exchanges was the need to be earthed by the realities of human abuse and aspiration in the slave trade. The reredos tradition and how local narrative was typically woven with the great biblical and gospel themes provided a constant guide.

A given element in all this was provided by the power of the Victorian stone reredos. It was in 1875 that this reredos was completed and featured four painted metal panels upon which the Victorian architect, Charles Hansom, had included decorated lettering of the Ten Commandments. These had become degraded and corroded and in their place the current work was installed in 2011.

The story of this stone reredos from the Victorian period has itself included acts of conflict and destruction. Soon after its completion a parish priest at the time chose to cover with a curtain the central image of the Agnus Dei [Lamb of God] declaring the image unhappily Roman Catholic! Later still the whole Reredos was covered by the hanging of a great curtain. This was the subject of arson and the curtain was replaced. In that process, in order that the curtain might hang more easily, the fourteen angel heads, featured high in the stone work, were cut away and destroyed. As the details of this story emerged came the realisation that the artistic commission themes of *creation, image, reconciliation and hope* were in a very real way already embedded in the story.

A profound dialogue has been around the significance of the central Agnus Dei carved image with the words from Saint John's Gospel 'Behold the Lamb of God'. The radical nature of this iconography created the profound energy of the scheme and this is addressed as the major focus in the work. It is this that became the focus to renew and practice the work of reconciliation from the core of Christian experience. Saint Stephen's Reconciliation Laboratory being one such outworking.

The images and style of the Reconciliation Reredos continues to provide a focus for reflection and inspiration that draws hope and new direction for many who engage with the Saint Stephen's programme and prayer.