

THE PROCESS OF PAINTING THE ICON (3)

This is an account of the PROCESS of the painting of this icon.

The resources for this account are;

1. Interview by Margaret Irvine for Pastoral Pages, 2016
2. Edited audio recording by Martin Elms, 2016
3. Conversations with 9 children who contributed to the paintings' themes, 2016
4. Conversations with Fr. Michael, Sr. Breda, Whaea Margerite Osborne, 2016
5. Conversations with and professional assistance from Grant Lodge, artist, 2016
6. My diary notes on the process January to November 2016

My wife Bea has helped throughout the process of painting this icon with useful critique.

Martin Elms has continuously provided overall support, material, ideas and critique for this commission that initially was presented to me, by him, on behalf of the school.

Grant Lodge, Artist in Kāpiti, came into my art room several times to provide supervision throughout 2016. His counsel was very helpful indeed. At the end of the year, Joseph Elms engineered metal brackets for placing the panel onto the wall.

At the beginning of 2016, before starting to paint the Ark, Fr. Michael anointed me after Mass one Sunday and asked the Holy Spirit to equip me and to see this icon enlighten many people.

Sr. Breda provided me with resource material re Sr. Nano Nagle.

Whaea Margurite Osborne gave me of her time and expertise re Māori understanding of 'Maui and his Fish'.

I have known that God has been with me and my painting continuously and His guidance has answered many questions and dilemmas.

PRECEDING EVENTS

On the day the land for the new school was blessed, Martin asked me if I would consider painting an icon for the school's foyer. I said that I was honoured to be asked and accepted five minutes later.....

At night the panic started; WHAT had I just agreed to ? Meanwhile, after having determined the size of the wooden panel, 1200 mm x 1200 mm., Adam Laker constructed a very fine example for me to start on. There was agreement that we should use only quality materials both for the panel as well as for the under paint, paints, oils and varnishes to be used.

There was also agreement that the Venetian technique of working with thin layers of paint and related treatment of the colours should be used to ensure luminosity in its final result.

There was great excitement when the panel arrived early 2016. It was placed in my art room on the large easel and I applied three layers of special primer paint. Fine sandpaper ensured the surface was smooth as glass. The panel had been wood coloured; now it was stark white and scary.....

From Martin I collected some early ideas regarding what the school was interested having included in the icon. On an A4 sheet of paper an initial composition was drawn and presented to Martin for comments. From here a detailed and final design was prepared on paper 1200 mm by 1200 mm. This was shown to Fr. Michael and subsequently presented for approval to Martin. The moment I drew the first lines of the final layout on the panel the actual work had began.

THE NATURE OF AN ICON

Briefly 'writing' an icon is really presenting theology in formal, thematic and symbol structures, composition, line and colour. In every icon it are these pervasive components that, together, have the power to proclaim and teach matters regarding our faith; it's people, events and mysteries. Every icon is designed to draw the observer into the world of faith. The central features of our faith are to enter our psyche; the unconscious (the unknown part of ourselves), the subconscious (accessible by dreams, memories, deja-vu, etc) and conscious (known parts of self) dimensions of that psyche. This takes place whenever we allow ourselves to become receptive in spirit and to engage on that basis in visual and spiritual contemplation. In and by means of this contemplative relating to the icons' content, the icon becomes a meeting place between God and us. The structures and persons the icon shows us are symbolically representative of the Trinity, the Saints and Biblical events. These representations have us experience the reality that they stand for....

This experience is available in all of the Catholic and Orthodox churches of the East and worldwide, in many Catholic churches in the West and worldwide and in some of the Protestant churches worldwide as well.

In the Orthodox churches an icon painter is appointed and blessed for this work as anyone would be appointed and blessed for a ministry within the church.

Icons are never intended to draw attention to the painter. The painter makes them only by the grace of God's guidance which is the main factor permeating and shaping the final result.

Icons are not works of art.

Icons are not works of religious art either.

They are not intended to be aesthetically appealing or meant to be pleasing to the senses.

They are never intended to be or to become museum pieces, or collectables, or objects of trade. They can only be made AND qualified by believers and by the Church. They belong wherever the believers are; in a church, monastery, convent, seminary, religious houses, schools or organizations, homes where believers live, work or travel. Yet, there are those who have been touched by the 'language' of icons by seeing them in auctions, museum and in private homes. They can and have been shown beyond their intimate places of belonging. And there they have made an impact !

They are ultimately intended to carry believers and those who allow themselves to become receptive to their message into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

THE PROCESS

Martin had identified nine children who were interested in artistic activities. I met them for three afternoons at St Patrick's school to explore the kind of contribution they wished to make.

From the start they were so keen to imagine and explore what they actually thought or wanted about this icon. We practiced a Florence Cane projective technique and gained access to fantasy and the images of the subconscious. We had brainstorming by contrast. We explored what they did NOT want in the icon. We discussed our faith. We recognized themes and events that seemed right for this icon. Drawings were made and soon we had plenty of material to begin to collate.

Ark of Noah was the first theme that was chosen. The nature of the animals was explored. snake was deemed unfit for residence in the Ark and relationships amongst those on board and the animals were specified. Martin had mentioned the idea of Hector dolphins to be somewhere and the children decided where they would be placed. The snake was proclaimed evil and the shark viewed as potentially

violent. Safety for everyone became important. One child drew the flying fish indicating that this animal could not make up his or her mind if it was a bird or a fish.... We thought that was okay; not everyone is ready to be two-in-one..... Noah was thought to have a monkey on his back because someone thought that when you do the right thing there is always something that comes to annoy you..... It's hard work to do two things at the same time; to welcome one thing and to reject another..... And nothing is easy or makes much sense to Noah as God's plans are mysterious and as wide as the world....., BUT, Noah has a future and he survives because he has heard from God that there is hope. Hope for his whole family AND for all the animals that God cares about, too. Later on, the monkey becomes a crab because 'a crab would annoy Noah more'.... When talking about the 'stairway to heaven' pattern for the mast we spoke once more about the ways of God and how to grow in doing right and refusing to play games with evil. White steps that are about purity came about when someone said that purity comes after the 'dirt' has been taken off. We talked about how 'dirt' needs to be removed first before there can be white, just like when you're doing the dishes..... We said that God has the power to clean our heads, hearts and behaviour when we want to be free of 'dirt' and become clean. Doing the dishes or having a shower does not do THAT..... How God does that within us is a matter of learning 'bit by bit', some children thought. Learning about the things of God, they felt, was something you did at home, in the school or at church. God was like a special Dad they thought and Jesus like a big and kind brother. All knew that another person who's there to help you too has the name of.....Mary ! And that she is like a Mother.

Some children thought, when someone falls overboard, the others would throw out a line so that one can get back on board instead of left to die. They thought that Noah would have some rope in case that happened. AND that he had medicine for those who fell ill while on board. Some animals or people are not to be trusted and you should tell others so they cannot hurt people. Some thought that getting

angry was okay as long as you did not take it out on someone who had nothing to do with it. It was felt that God could help and understand everybody so nobody would be all alone. One girl said that she herself felt alone sometimes as her friends in her street did not believe in God and did not belong to the Church. I asked her if she felt sad about that and she said she did. I responded by saying that we certainly would take her concerns into the icon. At that point, the story of the boat of St Paul and the storm came to mind and this was discussed in a further session.

God and St. Paul felt sorry for the people in the boat because they were in a terrible storm and about to die. God promised Paul that the boat would break up but all of the people would make it to the beach...people in the boat were scared, or angry, or get off the boat first, or said it was really not much of a storm, or prayed to a little god they found in their pocket. But Paul who had faith for those on board, talked to God about it and then to the people. We concluded that God can do very special things for those whom we love and care about, if they're believers or not. And that we should not think that God does not care about our family or friends because He actually does and always will. And it does not matter if someone has another religion like the Roman officer because God understands everything about other religions, officers and little pocket gods and He loves everyone..... We agreed that God can do amazing things that nobody else can do for us and for our friends. We also agreed that sometimes we pray and nothing happens. That is hard. However, we need to go on trusting God, especially when you do not understand why nothing has happened YET. It means, God is still working on it.

The school's logo on Kāpiti Island was decided upon in less than a minute. It's the right place; 'because it's high, higher than the beach; it's closer to God'.

The Holy Spirit and the Gifts were mentioned and we talked about how these gifts are there because God has these things inside of Himself, so has Jesus and the Holy Spirit. That's what God is like all the

time. In addition, it was felt there was no 'dirt' to be removed first. Some children felt that the 'dirt' was not such a problem; sometimes a little bit of dirt was not too bad. If it was bad, you could have God help you or forgive you and then it was okay. Someone mentioned that everybody has things that are not good but good things might come along and make up for it..... We agreed that God the Holy Spirit knows all about it so there's no point hiding something or lying about it; He's there and he loves you always and He can help you if you like Him to.....

He's always going to be your Big Dad.....

And your Guide.....

Sr. Nagle was discussed next and the children thought she was great because she loved kids and was a really good teacher AND a friend of God. Both her teaching and her friendliness were thought to be most important. Someone said; 'And she is tall' Someone said that if there was no teacher the class would not know what to do and the school would get closed and then you would not have a new school either.....

The Lord Jesus. Everyone felt He was to be placed 'high up'. Because He 'died for us'. He is 'in white clothes' and 'He has gone to heaven for always'. Has He finished His 'dying for us'? Yes, He had. Moreover, the heavens are 'light and golden and white and warm' 'It's never cold up there and nobody needs a heater because it is heaven'. (loud laughter ensues)

Jesus died for our sins. God brought Him back to life again. I asked some children if they would just die or would God also bring them to heaven to live forever. They thought that was a silly question because going to heaven was the whole idea.... (Point taken.....)

Jesus needs to be painted.....because it is He Who has the power to give us His wonderful promise of eternal life for everyone who believes.

St Patrick. There was agreement that St Patrick had to move to the new school; some children felt he needed to come with them 'because he has always been in the school because he started it'.....

Some children felt that he was with them 'because he's a priest and they are in the school'.

'They are like teachers but they're not teachers with a class'. 'They know things about God and they like to talk about that'. 'And they like to ask questions'. I wondered if St Patrick had been such a priest... 'Yes', some children thought.... 'But he had snakes but in NZ are no snakes'.

'He stands on them and kicks them in the guts'. (loud laughter ensues) We finish with the emphasis that St Patrick was a very brave priest for standing on them because his snakes were carriers of evil. We agree that St Patrick certainly can come along with us to the new school but we won't ask the snakes.....

The Virgin Mary was viewed by most children as 'our Mother' who 'prays for us always'.

'You have two mothers; one at home and one just everywhere'.....

The Virgin Mary needs to be painted.....

Once I started painting Mary it came to me that Mary did not just open her cloak to us as a gesture of loving, motherly care but that she opened to us her heart..... And so it came about that I painted the inside of her cloak red-brown, which is the colour of the human heart. Her dress is like the dress of an engaged Jewish woman 2000 years ago. The part of Mary that is most deeply involved in the work of her Son is her heart.... And she is an intermediary person; a woman always stands between her man and her child. In this icon Mary stands between Jesus and St Patrick who represents the Church. She was and remains God's gift to the Church; to the Ark and everyone inside....

The painting of Christ was not easy at all; it took a long time to determine not WHERE he stood but HOW. Acting, blessing, praying, speaking? It came to me that the essence of Christ's work lies in Him 'giving Himself'. I thought that to be quite a difficult reality to paint,

but it seemed possible for me to paint Him 'giving things OF Himself'. From there His place in the Book of Revelations came to mind. So in this icon Christ is showing us His wounds, making the point that He has finished the work He came to do. And because His work of sacrifice and obtaining salvation is finished, He can truly state that what is written on the scroll that crowns His head; 'All who believe in Me shall never die'.....

When it came to painting His head, I hesitated and felt unable to even start; I felt nervous and delayed the preparatory work. One evening I confronted myself and decided to first make a quick sketch in light brown paint to at least have an outline of His head. It took me two minutes to quickly sketch the contours and face. I walked away from what I had done and turned around. And what I saw was EXACTLY what I had been looking for! The only things to be added were the shadows and the highlights. All in all; 1 hour of painting only.....

God the Holy Spirit was present in my painting room that evening.....

For me, the reaction of the children when the icon was unveiled was a blessing; they were so happy to see first their names and then the pictures they recognized they'd made almost a year ago. Without their discussions, decisions and engaging art work this icon would have looked completely different from what we now have.....They have been creative, engaged, 'spot-on' and, at times, hilarious !

I also have to say that painting this icon has taught me to turn to God time after time.

Painting an icon causes the painting to speak and ask questions of the painter. Some of the questions an icon asks cannot be answered by the painter because he does not know the answer. What the painter does know though is WHO it is that can answer the question.

Johannes Sijbrant Paraparaumu January 2017