

## “The Wales Window”

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A reflection for Palm & Passion Sunday

Philippians 2.5-11

April 13, 2014

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I have put a picture on the screen.

[http://farm6.staticflickr.com/5004/5355835394\\_8c71068378\\_o.jpg](http://farm6.staticflickr.com/5004/5355835394_8c71068378_o.jpg)

It's a stained glass image of Jesus. We'll be talking about that in a moment.

Holy Week begins now. We parade with Jesus into the city. We hail him as our king, coming back to make things right. We marvel at this ruler who rides, not on a charging horse or a noble chariot, but a donkey. It's like a new president arriving at his inauguration on a beat-up ten speed bike. Something is very different about him.

Within the week, we will stand beneath his cross.

II

Let me tell you this window's story.

Sunday School had just finished, as 15-year-old Carolyn McKinstry walked to the church office. When the congregation began, 90 years earlier, it was called First Colored Baptist Church. Now it was just known as “Sixteenth Street Baptist.”

For black folk, it was “everybody's church.” They were welcome there. It hosted key leaders in African-American culture. More since the civil rights struggle began, Sixteenth Avenue was a hub. Organizers planned there, meetings happened there, protestors gathered there. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached there. Later, they would say that in *“this time of trial, turmoil and confrontation, the church provided strength and safety for black men, women and children dedicated to breaking the bonds of segregation”* in their city, which black citizens believed *“the most racist in America.”*<sup>1</sup> Successes came! Civic leaders had just agreed to integrate public places. A voter registration campaign was underway.<sup>2</sup>

For 15-year-old Carolyn, Sixteenth Street Baptist was simply her church.<sup>3</sup> That September

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<sup>1</sup> From the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church website: [www.16thstreetbaptist.org/history.html](http://www.16thstreetbaptist.org/history.html).

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia contributors, “16th Street Baptist Church bombing,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/16th\\_Street\\_Baptist\\_Church\\_bombing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/16th_Street_Baptist_Church_bombing)

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn's story is told in Gary Younge, “American civil rights: the Welsh connection,” *The Guardian* Sunday, March 6, 2011. [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/06/racist-attack-alabama-1963-gary-younge](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/06/racist-attack-alabama-1963-gary-younge)

Sunday morning, as she walked into the office, the phone rang. She answered. The male caller blurted, “Three minutes,” and hung up. Carolyn shrugged, and headed to the sanctuary. After fifteen steps, at 10:22 a.m., the explosion hit.

The Klansmen had put it under the back stairs. The bomb destroyed the steps, ripped through the back wall, and tore into the children. They were walking into the basement assembly room. Twenty-two were injured. Four were killed: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, (all aged 14) and Denise McNair (aged 11).

The only stained glass window still intact was of Jesus with children.

Birmingham, Alabama had lived up to its grisly nickname, “Bombingham,” from all the attacks on black homes and institutions that had happened over the years.<sup>4</sup>

This time, the world took notice.<sup>5</sup> Money poured in to rebuild. The next spring, the building reopened. Sixteenth Street Baptist continues to serve its city.

That brings me to this window.<sup>6</sup> Some 4,000 miles away, in Llanseffan, Wales, John Petts heard the news. A father, he grieved for the children. A stained glass artist, he thought of the destroyed windows. An idea formed. Collaborating with a newspaper editor, he started raising funds. They accepted no large donations. They didn’t want some rich benefactor paying for it. It was to be a gift of the people of Wales.

Today, this “gift of solidarity and generosity” rises in the rear centre of the sanctuary. So when the congregation rises to worship, it stands beneath the Wales window. The crucified Jesus.

### III

As we sit under that picture, what do you notice?

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<sup>4</sup> Four men were behind the bombing. When Robert Chamblis was arrested, he was in possession of 122 sticks of dynamite. He was charged and convicted . . . of illegal possession of explosives! His sentence was a \$100 fine and 6 months in jail. In 1977, the case was reopened. Chamblis was tried for murder and convicted; he died in prison while serving a life sentence. In 2000 Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry were also convicted, and are serving their sentences. The four conspirator, Herman Cash, had died before the case was reopened.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the funeral for three of the girls (the family of the fourth chose to have a private ceremony instead). More than 8,000 attended, including clergymen from all races. No civic leaders were in attendance.

<sup>6</sup> From Younge’s article.

[I gave time for congregational conversation. Below are the notes I used when different features were highlighted.]

### **Skin Colour**

Jesus is a black man. We're used to images of Jesus that look more like me! With his Semitic, Middle-Eastern roots, Jesus probably looked more like this.

Why might the artist have coloured Jesus' skin this way? What might it mean to those who regularly worship at Sixteenth Street Church? To those who attacked the church?

The congregation's current pastor is the Reverend Arthur Price. Here's what he says about this:

*. . . for many people in the white community during that time, to say that Jesus Christ was black and of African descent would be blasphemous. But I think the major message we try to take out of the window is not so much identifying Christ's color but knowing that Christ identifies with us. To the white community this is that the Jesus you love identifies himself with the African American community, so you are really crucifying him again when you persecute someone who does not look like you.<sup>7</sup>*

### **Facial Expression**

What expression do you see on Jesus' face?

Fleming Rutledge sees “. . . profound sorrow and suffering.” She says, “somehow it manages to suggest not only the agony of a victim of torture but also the Messiah's identification with his suffering people.”<sup>8</sup> (Rev. Rutledge wrote a blog post about this window. That's where I learned about it.)

### **Hands**

Though he is being crucified, a position of extreme vulnerability, his hands look strong. The hands are in different poses. What do they suggest to you?

#### **Left Hand (our Right)**

To many, his left hand (on our right side) conveys forgiveness. Is he offering forgiveness to the killers? To us? Or, is he asking for forgiveness? For them? For

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Younge's article.

<sup>8</sup> <http://ruminations.generousorthodoxy.org/2014/03/an-image-for-lenten-preaching-and.html>. It was through Fleming Rutledge's blog post that I first learned about the Wales Window.

us? Or, is this hand embracing and welcoming? Or maybe both forgiving and welcoming?

### **Right Hand (our Left)**

His right hand (on our left) looks like it's pushing something away. Is he pushing away oppression? Injustice? Hatred? All sorts of evil?

### **Clothing**

Does Jesus' clothing suggest anything to you?

Fleming Rutledge wonders if it is a baptismal garment? Or maybe a prison jumpsuit, or what convicts wore on a chain-gang.<sup>9</sup>

### **Darkness and Light**

What about the use of light in this window? Where is it darkest? Where is it brightest?

Again, Rutledge notices this. She writes:

*The idea of victory even in the most supreme anguish is also conveyed by the fact that whereas the Lord's feet and lower legs are blackened as though deep in ashes, his upperbody is suffused with light.*<sup>10</sup>

### **Rainbow**

Behind Jesus' head is a rainbow. Many colours, distinct from each other and also blending together. It might symbolize diversity. It might also recall God's promise after the Flood in the story of Noah.

### **Body Position**

A cross shape is in the background, but Jesus only seems to be attached to it in the middle. His hands and feet are free from it. Jesus' body itself forms the shape of the cross.

What feeling do you get from the shape of Jesus' body? From him not being held onto the cross, yet still being cross-shaped.

Fleming Rutledge writes: *"Christ is not actually attached to the cross, but seems to be emerging out of it . . . to me it suggests that even on the cross he is actively engaged*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

*with the domain of Death and cannot be fastened down by his executioner.”<sup>11</sup>*

### **“You Do It to Me”**

“*You do it to me*” comes from Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25. He says that whatever we do to one of the least of his brothers and sisters – giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, companionship to the sick and in prison – we do to him.

Why do these words fit this window, and what happened at Sixteenth Street Church?

Anything else you see in the Wales Window?

### IV

Let’s leave the window up for a few more minutes. I’m going to read Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Then we’ll just have a time for quiet thought, prayer, and meditation.

*[Christ Jesus], though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.*

*And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2.6-11 (New Revised Standard Version)