

FACT SHEET No 281

IT'S BEHIND YOU PATRICK REYNTIENS

By Dr Libby Horner, September 2016

To celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the Installation of the West Window, the noted Reyntiens authority wrote this article for the Southwell Music Festival Programme Book.

Patrick Reyntiens is Britain's foremost stained glass designer whose own work and his collaboration with John Piper transformed the conception and construction of stained glass. The eminent art historian Frances Spalding noted that Reyntiens 'erudition, technical agility and exuberance are even more immediately evident in those works which he both designed and created; and never more so than in his Puginesque Great West window for Southwell Minster with its tiers of angels rising up in a dense hymn of praise.'

The Perpendicular 7- light west window was added in the 15th century and glazed in plain green and yellow in the 19th century. In the 1990s the Minster's architect Martin Stancliffe suggested replacing this bland colouring with a stained glass window full of angels as beings of light and Reyntiens was given the commission. In general he worked in the traditional century's old method of making the windows entirely by hand, the cutting, painting, staining, plating, firing and leading but this window, installed in 1996, was made by the Barley Studios, York. Reyntiens was limited by the existing tracery but observed that it formed three interlocking arches and decided to add the symbolism of the Trinity. The design is a contemporary insight into a medieval mind, it fits perfectly with the architecture - the colours, patterns and themes interweave becoming more frenetic as one ascends and the tracery diminishes in size, giving a feeling of majesty like the finale of a triumphant piece of music.

At the base of each light Reyntiens revived an art form rarely seen since the 16th century - the predella. These were usually found at the bottom of an altarpiece, offering the artist more freedom from conventional iconography because they could be viewed close up. Here they illustrate interventions by angels: from left to right, an angel expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, Jacob wrestling with the angel, Tobias and the angel, the Annunciation, Christ in the wilderness, Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, and finally the angel appearing to the two Marys at the sepulchre.

The angels directly above hold roundels which represent the Seven Acts of Creation (related to Reyntiens preparatory panels exhibited in the Minster Centre, Church Street). These are, from left to right, the creation of light, the vault of the heavens, dry land appearing out of the waters, day and night, birds and fish, living creatures and finally human beings. Above their huge wings are pairs of angels holding books, trumpets, a harp, a pipe organ and a stringed

instrument. More angels hover above, those in the 2nd, 4th and 6th lights with wings outstretched representing the Trinity.

In the next tier of lights there are four short and three tall panels, the smaller ones depicting angels holding spheres of pure energy. The central panel shows the Virgin Mary (to whom the Minister is dedicated), very simply dressed in comparison to the glorious host of angels, clutching to her breast the seven Sorrows (in red) and supported by two angels. The Spirit of God hovers in a cloud above her which bears a Hebrew inscription 'I am who I am', and the panel is edged in green representing Jacob's ladder and the alliance between heaven and earth. The tall panel to the left depicts an angel holding Christ on the cross which is also a tree of life and a lily, referring to the Annunciation. On the right an angel holds the emblems of the Holy Spirit, a dove descending and tongues of fire. The angels at the top of these larger panels represent the Trinity.

Above this the tracery becomes smaller and the activity more hectic with angels playing musical instruments, balancing on wheels of fire, there is the Eye of God and at the pinnacle the Godhead with the hand of God and the letters alpha and omega, the Blood of Christ in a red chalice and the dove of the Holy Spirit, again reinforcing the theme of Trinity.

Reyntiens also designed six exquisite windows for the Chapter House Passage where each angel holds a sphere in which a Biblical episode is portrayed and the background is filled with foliage reflecting the outstanding stone carving in the Chapter House itself. These windows were made by Reyntiens son John.

Reyntiens is hugely intellectual, well versed in the liturgy and very versatile. Visitors to Southwell might be surprised to realise that the same artist made the abstract Baptistry window at Coventry Cathedral and, together with Piper, designed all the stained glass for the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King in Liverpool, a hugely theatrical décor but with a contemplative and spiritual resonance. The Good Shepherd in Woodthorpe, Nottingham is another example of Reyntiens abstract glass, the entire parish church bathed in blue light from his 'Biblical Trees'. In totally different vein are the eleven windows in the Great Hall of Christ Church, Oxford which are a mixture of Tudor strap-and-quarry work with mottos and escutcheons. Reyntiens is a man for all seasons and a living national treasure.