

# CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, LATHBURY.

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(Read before the Annual Meeting, at Newport Pagnell.)

Having undertaken to give some account of the frescoes, or, to speak more correctly, paintings in distemper, in the Church of Lathbury, it will not be irrelevant, I think, to my purpose if I first offer a few remarks upon the general subject of paintings in holy places as connected with divine worship.

From the earliest period the practice of thus adorning these places seems to have obtained. "All art," it has been well said, "from the time of Egypt and Assyria, consisted mainly in either historical or symbolic representations of the spiritual ideas and relations of man; and the temples of man's worship were the centres of sculpture and colour." Our province at this time is, of course, Christian art; and, confining ourselves to this, I may remind you that the early ideas of this art are in a measure preserved to us, as in the instance of the Catacombs. It is familiar to all here that those caves abound with pictorial representations of divine subjects; the early Christians appearing to have felt that it was good to surround themselves with objects of this kind, even when there was so little to set them off as works of art. From the first I think we can trace the custom to the joint motive of the æsthetic and didactic principles. All Christian art must include both. The painter of religious subjects, while he obeys the instinct of art which he feels within him, if he is at all worthy of his vocation, must desire that his work shall not only please the sense, but also inform the heart of the spectator. That the conveyance of instruction through the eye was the main thing aimed at in paintings in churches, cannot, I think, be questioned. Such teaching would take a special form and colour from the tone and spirit of the age. This is manifest in the instance of the Catacombs already referred to. We find in the paintings there a calm and cheerful tone throughout, as has been observed by Mr. Lecky. Though in the midst of the dead, their place of worship a sort of large tomb itself, few ideas, or forms, of human suffering occur; not even the Crucifixion, nor any of the scenes of the Passion were represented, nor the day of Judgment, nor the sufferings of the damned—subjects so common and universal afterwards. The Good Shepherd, wreaths of flowers, the emblems of Christian hope, the miracles of mercy—such representations abound. As time went on, a sterner feeling took the place of the hopeful and bright side of Faith; and we have in the works of the Byzantine school, and especially in the paintings of our Lord, a melancholy, and even severe aspect, testifying to men's deeper sense of the corruption round them, and of the firm struggle with evil existing

in the world. Accordingly we find in most churches of the mediæval period representations of the last Judgment, placed commonly over against the descriptions of Paradise, and other subjects expressive of the momentous interests and final destiny of the soul.

With this brief preface, I will proceed at once to describe plainly the paintings of my church. The paintings are of various date, ranging from the fourteenth to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The kind of work is that called "Tempera." The materials used were various—cheese, eggs, size, beer, milk, and other things, were employed as siccatives. It is thought that the Italian preparation with cheese was the most lasting.

Much of the painting in my church must have been of this character, judging by the freshness of the colours still; and from the fact that, in uncovering some of the frescoes, we often got off the layers of whitewash which overlay them, in large pieces, or flakes.

To come to the paintings themselves, and to begin with the chancel. The only remains of painting here consisted of a rather rude drawing of a vine branch on either side of the Communion table. At the bottom of that on the north side was a reference in figures to the sixth chap. of St. John, ver. 5; indicating that the passage in question was then interpreted as bearing upon the Sacrament. This, as belonging to the period of the Reformation, is worthy of notice. On the south wall of the chancel, over the priests' door, was a portion of a passage of the Epistle to the Corinthians, from the Wiclif Bible; also, as you will understand, a work of the later date.

There is no trace of old painting on the chancel. May it not be that the chancel not being so much in the view of the people—the rood-loft and the screen, of course, shutting it out from the nave in a great measure—did not contain ordinarily so much of this kind of decoration as the rest of the building? This conjecture, however, would, I believe, be disputed by many.

It is clear, from the examination made by us at different times, that the whole of the nave and aisles were painted in patterns of various kinds. As we might expect, the richest in design, and the most expressive in character, were to be found in the nave. One portion of them covered the space on either side, enclosing the two arcades of the north and south pillars. It consisted of a

rich and flowing pattern, of graceful outline, and very harmonious colouring, running up to the roof. Subjects were introduced into it representing some of the sacraments of the church, and a burial. On the south wall we see a church, a portion of it in good preservation; outside of it are two persons in a kneeling posture, with bare legs, and uplifted hands, and very dolorous faces, suggesting the idea of penance. Issuing from the door of the church is an ecclesiastic, holding something in his hand. Farther on, in a line with the building, is a portion of a bed, with a tester and curtain, in which a sick woman reclines; the pillow large and well designed. The hand of a priest rests upon her shoulder; I say a priest, because some time ago, before the mortar had fallen out, there were traces of a red habit to be seen. It is probable that the drawing expresses a case of extreme unction. At the side of the bed there was a graceful figure of a female attendant, with a kind of turban on her head, kneeling.

In line with this, by natural sequence, we have one of the most perfect and interesting frescoes in the church. A plain dark ground represents a grave, on one side three persons are kneeling as engaged in prayer, at the head and foot of the grave is a person holding one of the ends of the winding-sheet, tied in at the neck, and terminating with the full and wide plaits which supplied a firm hold to those engaged in the operation of letting the corpse down into its shallow bed. A small red cross is painted over the breast of the dead person. The individuals here represented are of both sexes.

Another subject occurs rather lower than those which I have described. A youth is sitting upright on a kind of sofa; he has on a single habit, or shirt, one leg is extended along the seat horizontally; a female figure, in a red habit, stands before him with her hands joined together, as if in prayer; whether this may have been the use of chrism in baptism, or simply an illustration of praying by the sick, it is difficult to say. On the north side of the nave we have a beautiful example of the familiar and striking subject, the weighing of souls. A person of commanding aspect, with a high covering on his head, such as to remind one of the Papal tiara, is standing, the scales in his hands. In this case they are not *scales*, but *bags*, another form of the same idea. The beam which

crosses his body, is depressed on one side. By him stands the Virgin Mary, with her crown of glory; in her left hand extended over her shoulder she holds a lily, her right apparently is placed on the beam, as if she were inclining the scale to mercy's side. The drawing is excellent, and nothing can be more graceful than the Virgin's attitude, the expression of the countenance, and the action, both imply reverent, but prevailing, intercession.

Over the belfry door, on the lofty and blank west wall, there was a tall and rather gaunt figure of a man walking with a staff through what seemed a wilderness, or plain covered with high grass. There was a mark of a wound in the side, with an arrow sticking in it; his hair was unkempt and loose, the face bore altogether a scared and stricken look. His left hand grasped the staff; in the right he held a kind of scroll, of which we were able to decypher a small portion as follows:—

...**high**  
...**sbroke**  
...**rtal stroke**

The most probable conjecture, I think, is that it was meant to portray Cain as a fugitive, with the curse of God resting upon him. "Hæret lateri lethalis arundo."

Returning now to the east end of the nave, according to the usual arrangement, there is a representation of heaven and hell: on the northern side the happiness of the blest is depicted; on the southern, the misery of the damned; each subject respectively including and occupying a portion of the two opposite walls of the nave. The northern wall contains in the middle space a burying-ground, or garden of the dead in Christ. It is planted with shrubs; black spaces among them represent tombs, out of which the departed are rising, in various postures. Above this, and reaching to the top of the wall, is a building with large windows of an ecclesiastical type, and buttresses; on the battlements which crown the building, several figures appear, not with wings, who may be supposed to be the guardians of it. No doubt it represents the heavenly Jerusalem.

The subject before us is carried at the angle round to the wall of the nave. Here also bodies of the saints are rising in tiers; some risen, and looking to the Virgin,

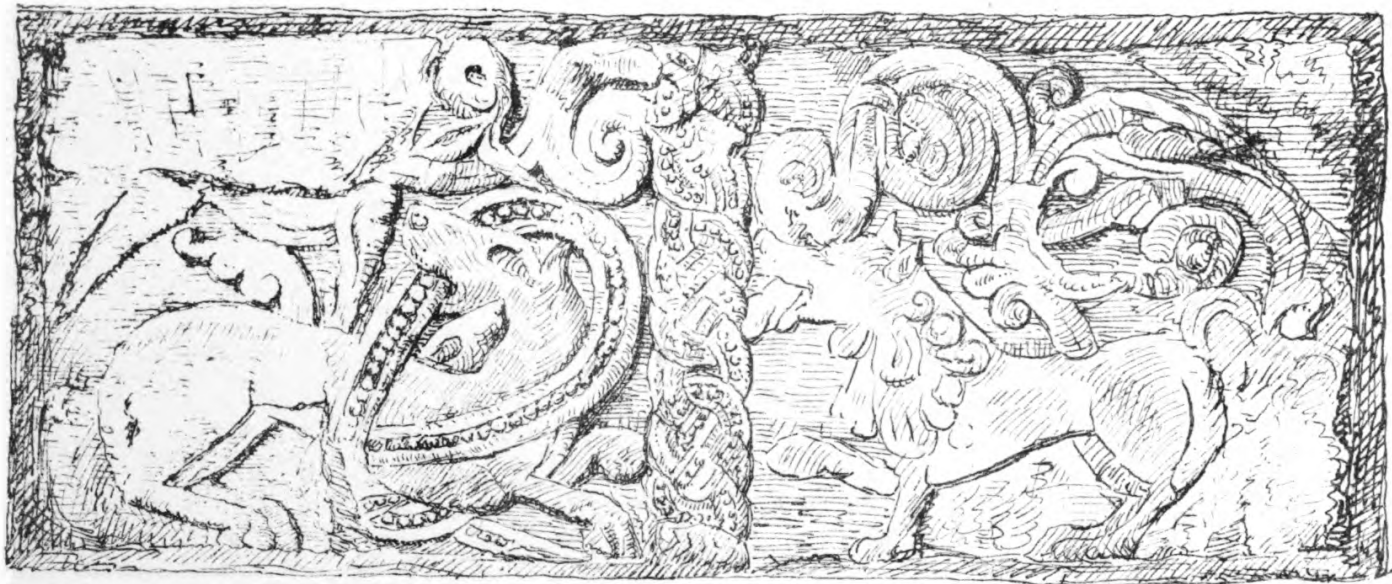
who is standing in the midst; and, as may be inferred, about to discharge her intercessory office in another shape before the Judge.

The opposite delineation is not by any means so perfect as this; indeed, all on the lower part of the east wall is gone, and what remains on the south side is very imperfect. There is a figure of Michael above, holding his sword, pointed, we may suppose, at some objects which resemble skulls. Below him are three or four figures of the lost, naked; and, as it seems, with snakes coiled round them.

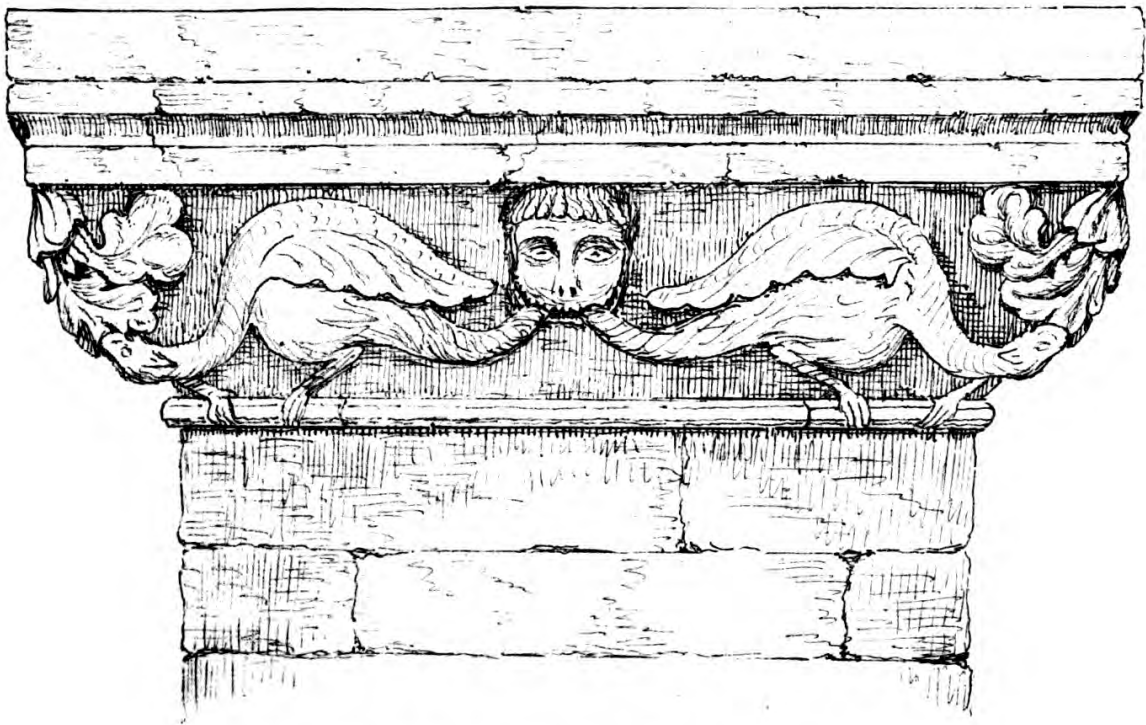
In the upper portion of the wall of the nave, immediately over the arch, there is a half length portrait of our Lord, wearing an oriental head-dress, and of sad aspect, with more of the Byzantine style about it than anything else in the church. He is seated on a rainbow, with the left arm held up, on which are several streaks of blood. It seems to signify the idea of the stigmata; or to be a kind of legendary rebuke to the slow of faith, such as Thomas. On the north side of the wall in line with our Lord, is a small figure of St. John seated in a boat, and holding the wafer; on the south side a well-drawn figure of St. Michael, holding a long staff with a round head, terminating in a sort of point. Scattered about the wall are patches of diaper, apparently to represent clouds.

I have thus given a brief account of the most interesting of these frescoes. The question arises as to the fitness and utility of such decorative art in churches. As regards the æsthetic part of it, I think it is clear that these paintings served materially to form and cultivate taste both in the spectators and in the artists themselves, and, as a general rule, the true advantage of the imitative arts must be held to consist in the refining of the ideas and thoughts of the many, more even than in the forming a high critical standard in the *few*.

Next, which is a point of far greater moment, How are we to think of their effect upon the conscience and spiritual apprehension of the people? It is capable of demonstration, that in our present condition upon earth, our religious knowledge must always include the ideas of visible and material things. The highest intellect cannot escape from this law. Heaven is thus to our thoughts a definite spot; angels offer themselves to our conception as



*Stone slab found in Lathbury Church*  
B.



*Capital of a Pillar in Lathbury Church.*



glorious beings with wings; perdition and the loss of God's favour comes in the shape of the flames of hell. Who will venture to assert, or is able to prove, that these ideas are not all realities? It follows that just and apposite representations, objective in character, of man's relations to the invisible, and of his final destiny, so far as they rest upon positive statements of Holy Writ, may be great helps to the keeping up a lively sense of these all-important verities in the multitude.

The paintings of the kind to which I allude, those in my own church for instance, set before the minds of the people what have been called the "four last things"—Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell, are represented, sometimes grotesquely (I would here remark that the aim of the grotesque in such paintings was intense reality), but always intelligibly. The need of mediation, that cardinal point in the system of our religion, was made very prominent. In the Romish Church this was not perhaps so much weakened in its influence upon the heart of the worshipper, as diverted from its proper object. When the people of this village, in the ages gone by, came to early matins, the picture I have alluded to with its solemn beauty met their eyes as they entered the church, and must have touched a chord in their hearts, as conveying the idea of justice tempered with mercy—*divine* mercy, according to the notions of their church.

In choosing and arranging subjects for the decoration of churches *now*, our purer faith will of course avoid all that is either erroneous in doctrine, or merely legendary. But how wide a field is still open to the exercise of Christian art! In churches of large size grand paintings of the events of our Saviour's history may be executed; the walls of our temples may be as eloquent of the imperishable records of his life as the windows.

At the same time a limit is to be fixed. The ornamentation of churches may be carried so far as to distract, not help, devotion. It would be a serious evil were people to come to look upon churches as galleries of art. All that is done in God's house in this way should be subsidiary to the great idea of the worship of Himself; and therefore a few well-chosen subjects, naturally and reverently treated, and fitted thus to quicken faith, are to be preferred to grotesque conceits, or too elaborate ornamentation.