

The Altarpiece of St. Nicholas Chapel,

Christchurch Cathedral, Newcastle

The historical St. Nicholas was Bishop of Myra (in Asia Minor) in the 4th. century AD. Many aspects of his life have become mythologised over subsequent centuries.

Depicted in the triptych altarpiece are three different episodes in the life of St. Nicholas that point out three of his attributes of sainthood.

One of these attributes is the protection of children. The central panel shows St. Nicholas miraculously raising three young children back to life; they had been murdered, dismembered and put in three tubs of brine by a malicious butcher who planned to sell them as pork. The children are shown rising joyously from the tubs of brine; they are nude, freshly born, just as St. Nicholas has raised them up. This resurrection is really a rebirth in the spirit. The tubs of brine are metaphoric wombs from which the children are reborn. The children themselves represent revitalised souls; their prior death and dismemberment symbolise the despair and disassociation that occurs when a conscious connection with God is broken, either through sin or some malicious agency. Bishop St. Nicholas is depicted with arms raised and outstretched in the form of a cross as he resurrects the children. He has become so strongly identified with Christ he is able, by virtue of his spiritual oneness, to make them fully whole. These three children stand for the human condition and offer us the message of salvation through Christ.

The left wing of the triptych refers to St. Nicholas's role as the patron saint of mariners. It depicts prayerful survivors being rowed towards the shore (and safety) while a few unfortunates have fallen into the sea and drowned. The rainbow shines in peace after the storm.

St. Nicholas was also an unconditional gift-giver. The right wing of the triptych refers to the rescue of the three daughters of a destitute nobleman from a life of prostitution by his gift of three bags of gold. The poverty-stricken father was about to sell his daughters because he could not afford their dowries.

Symbolically woven through the triptych is the rainbow and rainbow colour sequences. A rainbow contains all the colours in a coherent form. Visually, it signifies wholeness and completeness. Conversely, the three primary colours are shown as disordered strands, symbolising chaos. Such strands can be seen in the brine tubs and in the ocean of the left wing of the triptych, where the drowned ones float. Bishop Nicholas's outspread cope shows the rainbow sequence. (The cope is held open by red male figures, who also act as intermediaries between us and the miraculous events in the painting.) An actual rainbow is depicted in the left panel to show hope and the eventual fulfilment that awaits the rescued people in the boat. The rainbow-tinted white flowers of the right panel continue this theme.

The design and setting of the triptych has taken into account its location. The immediate surroundings of the altarpiece include the visible pipes of the organ and the top of the painting reflects the triangles of the pipes above. In the larger setting, the location of the Cathedral itself

is picked up in the painting. The Cathedral interior is suggested in the central panel, the ocean in the left panel and the terrace houses of the Hill in the right panel.

The ceiling and altar wall of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican by Michelangelo is surely the most famous example where nudity has been used in a church context. There the nude figures serve to celebrate man as God created him and the figures of angels, called 'ignudi', represent purity, thus combining the humanist traditions of the ancient world with the spiritual values of Christianity. In the case of the Cathedral triptych, the nude figures are treated more symbolically; they are painted red. This stylistic device removes the painted images from a literalism that would work against the spirit of the altarpiece. But the balance between the outer physical and the inner spiritual is very much part of the message of wholeness, the theme of the work.

Written by the artist John Montefiore