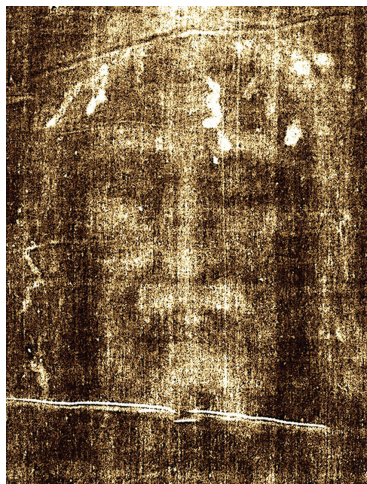


## Defining a Rood - The Rood and the Holy Shroud

By Canon Andrew Willie

Of interest to those who maintain, as I do, the genuineness of the Holy Shroud of Turin, has been the way the face has been actually reproduced in Eastern Orthodox images, especially the Christos Pantocrator, the icon of Christ Almighty. Burial Cloth the Shroud may be, but its ultimate portrayal for Orthodoxy is a combined one of the face of Our Lord as Christos Victor, the Conqueror of Death and also Apocalyptic Judge. Western art traditionally has taken a slightly different view of Our Lord's main image, centring it on His Cross, Suffering, Death and Resurrection, the historical process rather than its end. Based on the words of the Gospel stories, and found in the wound marks on the Shroud, the process has been historically very much central to western art. Its icon is the rood.



Currently there are three definitions of rood in use: the first is the traditional one, derived from the Anglo-Saxon word, **rood**, and describing a wooden post, such as the upright of the cross. This awaited the cross-bar which Our Lord, injured and abused, carried on his shoulder to Calvary. In a natural progression, rood came to describe the crucifix, the rod and cross-bar with Our Lord's tortured body, nailed to them. There exists an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem, **The Dream of the Rood**, original copies of which are found not in England, but in Europe, and in three different English dialects; this indicates its origins in oral tradition, its universality and the regard in which it was held. In celebrating the Cross it also celebrated the fragments of what were thought to be from the True Cross. One of these was given to King Charles III as a coronation gift by Pope Francis and placed by the King in a processional cross used at the coronation. Afterwards it was passed on to the Anglican Church in Wales, to be shared with its Catholic counterpart.



Alas, all the fragments were of pine, common in Northern Europe, whereas the splinters of wood on the shroud itself are from a tree common in the Middle East, Holm Oak. However, Anglo-Saxon usage meant any tree could become significant as an icon of the cross. This was a matter which Maurice Barnes, who died in 1973, took very much to heart. He was an artist and Newport Cathedral Churchwarden. For him, the rood was the trunk of a dead tree in the middle of the Cathedral churchyard, This tree he reproduced beautifully in both engraving and painting. (See above) Becoming a danger, it was later removed.

In the Middle Ages, the simple cross surmounted what was [and still is] known as the rood screen.



*Gwernesney, Monmouthshire, Rood Screen © Val Willie*

This not only acted as entrance to the chancel, but was also surmounted by a loft: from the loft the gospel was read when the Mass was celebrated. Access to the loft was from a winding stone staircase still found in many mediaeval churches, including St Woolos, though the loft, screen, rod and crucifix, themselves, actually survive in far fewer.



*Llangwm Uchaf, Monmouthshire, Rood Screen © Val Willie*

A third definition of rood, is simply of the **corpus**, the body of Our Lord, given a modern feel, to bring contemporaneity to the idea that both the world and the Church really need the Risen Lord at the present time. Sir Basil Spence built the modern Anglican Coventry Cathedral at right angles to the unroofed ruins of the old. For the east end of the new, Graham Sutherland designed a tapestry portraying a Christos<sup>1</sup> with a face reminiscent of that found on a Byzantine icon and His body clothed in white, symbolising the shroud, but draped in a gown with an upper and lower egg-like shapes, above and below the waist that speak of birth and of rebirth, [resurrection], very much at the centre of this work. At the same time, thistle motifs remind us of Our Lord's suffering.

Of six Anglican Cathedrals in Wales, three have individual roods in the shape of figures of Christ, life-size or larger. In Bangor Cathedral, a wooden figure is present, the Mostyn Christ<sup>2</sup>, dating from 1450 and given to the Cathedral 500 years later: the fact that parts of this sculpture are perfect and parts [the arms] damaged adds to the poignancy of the image. Cardiff's Llandaff Cathedral, remodelled by George Pace after bomb damage in the second world war, has at its centre a drum supported by splayed arches. On the drum is what seems a carved image of the ascending Christ<sup>3</sup> by Jacob Epstein, or is it one of His descending as Universal Judge. Though I have always seen it as the former, I have to admit that it could be both, and admit that as either it is unusual.



*Corpus of wires and nails by  
Tay Swee Siong  
in front of artwork with stained glass  
by John Piper & Patrick Reyntiens.  
Photo © Ian Black,  
Dean of Newport Cathedral*

The third Welsh Christos was commissioned for Newport Cathedral. The artist, Tay Swee Siong is from Singapore. Created from wires and nails, it is as far from the nice, neat renderings of the Renaissance Crucifixions as it is possible to be. In fact, the image it resembles in some ways is that on the Turin Shroud: the Crown of Thorns on both is not a neat circlet nicely woven but bits of a bush grabbed randomly for torture: the nails in hands and feet could have been placed as shown on the Shroud, through wrists and heels, to prevent the body from tearing away from the Cross. Yet simply, because of the way light permeates the structure, like the Shroud, Siong's work not only speaks of the Cross, but also of the Resurrection.

The sculpture is above the nave altar. At the east end, behind the high altar is another work of art. This was commissioned by chapter on the advice of Alban Caroe, architect responsible for the Cathedral's modern east end, from the distinguished English artist, John Piper: he was assisted by the artist in stained glass with whom he often worked, Patrick Reyntiens. Though not all of the chapter liked the overall design, financial considerations fortunately meant that the commissioning of new artists could not be afforded. Thus we have a work which blends in beautifully with Tay Swee Siong's.

There are three elements in Piper's design. The dominant one is of the firmament of creation, originally in a design by Piper: it was then realised by the scenery painters of Covent Garden in a canvas covering most of the east end of the church. Piercing through the top of the canvas is a roundel of stained glass, its ribs in the shape of a Cross from which the canvas's image of creation seems to flow.

The colours in the window suggest a Mediterranean landscape as found in the Holy Land. In front of all this is the Corpus with nails, placing Our Suffering Lord at the centre of it all. In doing so it pleads the case for the Shroud as the most important Rood of all.

I am aware of a limitation to this article: I lack knowledge of all the places in Britain where large roods are found. Indeed, having such knowledge may have made this article overlong. I would be grateful, however, were readers to address my ignorance with any additional knowledge of their own. I am concerned, too, that of the places mentioned, only Coventry Cathedral has hosted the excellent Shroud Exhibition. I would love it to be otherwise.



*Detail from the underside of a Rood Screen,  
Llangwm Uchaf, Monmouthshire. © Val Willie*

### **Postscript**

After writing this article, I came across the rood, a statue of the resurrected Christ, above the tower door of Liverpool’s Anglican Cathedral. It was completed in 1992, the last work of the English sculptor, Dame Elizabeth Frink, and placed in position in Holy week the following year, a few days before she herself died. She was of the opinion that she had produced a work showing the resurrected Lord, but although Our Lord’s face shows suffering, strength and sensitivity, His arms and hands are positioned to speak basically more of welcome and this has led some to describe it simply as **the Welcoming Christ**, and as a very human presentation of Our Lord: this in fact should have been expected, as one of Frink’s three main themes was the divine in human form. This is a theme found in the resurrection narratives in the Gospels of Luke and John: the Shroud itself shows that it once contained One who may have been divine, but who certainly was human too. The Shroud exhibition took place in Liverpool’s Roman Catholic cathedral many years ago, where the altar boasts a Frink crucifix, and I would like to think it will take place in the Anglican Cathedral soon.

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<sup>1,2,3</sup> Photographs of the Christos images in Cathedrals at Coventry, Bangor and Llandaff are to be found in *DEAN’S CHOICE CATHEDRAL TREASURES OF ENGLAND AND WALES*, Edited by Janet Gough.



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