

The Picture

After our Sister Lynda died we decided, along with her parents, that we would commission a painting for our chapel using some money that had been gifted to us. It was no easy task asking an artist to produce a picture that satisfied them and which, we also appreciated. We had done this once before, many years ago, and none of us liked the finished article and we did not subsequently learn to appreciate it. This time we were more confident in our choice of artist. She was Carmela Inauen. She was someone we knew in Switzerland who had her own studio. We had visited it and loved her lively paintings. She had stayed with us twice here in England for short visits. Each time, she had used her thumb to produce two pictures which were already in our chapel. We liked them. One was the 'Loaves and Fishes', as described in the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the other, a luscious bunch of grapes depicting the Vine. The latter was against a blue/grey wall where a cross could be seen almost hidden between the building blocks. We are not connoisseurs of art but even we appreciated the imagery in this depiction of a biblical theme.

Before we contacted her we had to agree on a subject. One thought was, 'The Dawn'. Lynda had expressed a desire that this composition by one of our Sisters should be sung at her funeral service. We also had in mind, 'The Good Shepherd', as we had often read to her of his love. Not being able to decide which of these would be the most appropriate we decided to leave it to Carmela to choose.

We waited in anticipation, and it must be confessed, some anxiety, for the painting to arrive. Eventually, after several months, a mutual friend arrived from Switzerland carrying a large parcel. We cautiously removed the wrappings, taking our time, lest we caused any damage. Eventually the object which we longed to view, yet simultaneously feared to see, was exposed to our scrutiny. It must be confessed that, at first, we did not know what to make of it. It seemed very ordinary. On the left-hand side there was a figure that could only be the Good Shepherd but a Swiss country yokel would be a better description. The sheep were being ushered through a door that also seemed to be part of a window. Through the window there was light from the sun rising. She had brought the two images together. There was a rather stark tree but bearing fruit that we identified as the tree of life mentioned in the book of Revelation. At first, that was all we saw. It was framed and hung on our chapel wall.

Despite our slight dismay the picture seemed to have the power to intrigue us. We sensed that somewhere we were missing something important. It wasn't too long before we realised that the window was like a window into heaven and unmistakably the edges of the panes in one central place formed a cross. A dark splash of paint, not far from the door, indicated the valley of the shadow of death. The sheep were safely through this dark vale and the Shepherd was guiding them through the door because Jesus is the door to heaven. What further imagery was there in this painting?

Weeks later, a Sister suddenly glimpsed in it a slim figure with dark hair reaching up to take fruit from the tree of life. The long dress she was wearing was white, again as symbolised in the Book of Revelation. Once this Sister had seen it, she could not unsee it! Our visitors

and ourselves divided into those who could see it, and those who couldn't. The slender figure was undoubtedly similar to Lynda; moreover there was a reassuring arm around her waist. Were those white clouds in the dawn really clouds, or were they angels? There seemed to be no end to the truths contained in this work of art.

The friend who had brought the picture from Switzerland came to visit us again. We questioned her about it. She remarked that Carmela was renowned for the hidden imagery in her pictures.

A number of years ago, we were with a friend in Bangor Hospital who was dying. A doctor came into the room and said, "What matters now is not what we can see but what we can't see". Carmela, with the eyes of an artist, had glimpsed heaven and it was there in her painting for us to discover. In life, too, there is a familiar picture that we clearly see all around us but also one which we only glimpse, our eternal home with Jesus. As St Paul says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then shall I know fully, even as I am fully known", 1 Cor. 13:12 NIV.

