



WHERE ART MEETS PRAYER



There's a lot more to an icon than a picture, iconographer Regan O'Callaghan explains to Joanna Moorhead as he unveils a new work for the prison chaplaincies of England and Wales.

Icons are some of the most beautiful religious images: but are they art? Not really, says icon artist and Anglican priest Regan O'Callaghan: the truth is, he explains, they are prayer. 'What icons are about,' he says, 'is praying with your eyes open.'

Regan, a New Zealander who has lived in Britain for many years, is in his studio showing me his latest work, commissioned by Fr Roger Reader, prisons advisor to the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales; a reproduction of which is to be given to each of the prison chaplaincies. It's a stunning piece featuring a traditional representation of the Pantokrator, or Almighty, with two smaller images referencing Mary and the Rosary, and God's mercy. For the prisoners who see the icon in their chaplaincies, there is plenty to reflect on in the image; and like every icon, explains Regan, the work is loaded with symbolism and meaning. The gaze and the hands of the central figure, he explains, are the crucial element: the Pantokrator is raising his fingers in blessing; and the person he's blessing is, of course, me or you; in other words, the viewer. We are invited, in the



AN ICON IS ALWAYS, SAYS REGAN, ABOUT THE PROCESS OF EMERGING FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

Rosary image, to reflect on the value of individual prayer, and on the merciful nature of God.

An icon is always, says Regan, about the process of emerging from darkness into light. 'The image I always use is of going into a dark cave. You feel uncertain, anxious, and you begin to make out shapes - and then you make out a figure. And

after a while you begin to see the features of the figure; and perhaps you even work out who it is. And that's how it is when you paint an icon: you work from darkness, and you progress towards light.'

The emphasis for an icon creator is always about process; and a central part of this is the paints. Like many icon painters, Regan uses egg tempura, mixing egg yolks with pigments to create the colours he needs. 'It's a very organic way to work, and it gives a wonderful result because the egg yolk gives a sheen and gloss - egg tempura is a way of letting the light get through the pigment,' he explains.

Prayer is an inherent characteristic of an icon; but it is also a formal part of it, and Regan begins every session in his studio by reciting the iconographer's prayer. The process is laborious, with a great deal of work on preparing the wooden

IT'S A VERY ORGANIC WAY TO WORK, AND IT GIVES A WONDERFUL RESULT BECAUSE THE EGG YOLK GIVES A SHEEN AND GLOSS - EGG TEMPURA IS A WAY OF LETTING THE LIGHT GET THROUGH THE PIGMENT



panel, which has to be sanded down and then painted with gesso. 'You have to invest a lot of time on this part of the work, and people sometimes get frustrated because they want to get to the exciting bit, which is the painting. But the whole point of this is that it's a process, and you have to put in lots of work and time and have patience.'

Surprisingly, Regan says no artistic talent is required to create an icon: what matters is making the process into a prayer, and setting aside the time. When he teaches iconography classes, he tells his students that it's not an art class, it's a prayer class.

IT'S A RICH TIME TO BE AN ICONOGRAPHER, BECAUSE THE LAST TWO DECADES HAVE SEEN A BIG RISE IN INTEREST IN ICONS AND WHAT THEY REPRESENT AND MEAN

Regan was raised a Catholic in New Zealand; he remembers going to Mass at St Patrick's in his home town of Taupo on the North Island of New Zealand. His heritage is an interesting one: his Catholic antecedents were Irish, but on another side he is of Maori descent.

He moved to the UK when he was 23 and started going to first a Methodist church and later an Anglican one. At university he was studying art, theology and ethics - and when he went on to do a master's in ethics, the vicar at his church asked him whether he'd considered studying for the priesthood. He hadn't, but thought he would 'at least knock on the door', and was accepted at an Anglican formation college; he didn't really feel, he says, that he was

saying farewell to Catholicism since he's in the Anglo Catholic tradition of the Church of England; and during his formation he spent a term at the Roman Catholic English College in Rome.

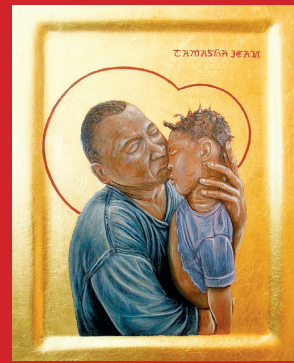
He was ordained in St Paul's Cathedral in 2001, after which he did a curacy in a parish. 'I loved parish life,' he says. 'But I knew if I went down the parish priest route I wouldn't be able to do my art.' So he decided to become a non-stipendiary minister, and began to take on commissions and to take on arts residencies. For the last few years he has worked out of a studio in the palace of the Bishop of London, and he runs education projects in, amongst other places, St Paul's Cathedral.

He has carved out his own role as an artist/priest; and it is, he maintains, an exciting time to be doing it. 'It's a rich time to be an iconographer, because the last two decades have seen a big rise in interest in icons and what they represent and mean.

LIFE TODAY BOMBARDS US WITH IMAGES - BUT WHAT ICONS ARE ABOUT IS CONNECTING US WITH SOMETHING DEEPER, SOMETHING MORE SUSTAINING. THEY ARE WINDOWS, OR DOORWAYS, INTO ANOTHER REALM ENTIRELY



Above: The Three Mothers • Below Left: Tamasha Jean • Below Right: Lucy



There's also a re-engagement with art and what it means, because we've had this concept of art as autonomous and self-centred and reflecting an image of the artist, and icons are about turning all that on its head and saying artists are devotional, and ritualistic, and they're not about us, they're about God.

'Life today bombards us with images - but what icons are about is connecting us with something deeper, something more sustaining. They are windows, or doorways, into another realm entirely.' ■

THE THREE MOTHERS

This triptych was commissioned by the Bishop of London, and depicts three smiling women from the congregation of St John in Bethnal Green, London. The women reflect the diverse nature of the community of St John's, and each woman is a wife, mother and grandmother, a person of faith and a committed hard-working member of the church, something Regan says he was particularly keen to celebrate. The women symbolise the important role of women, particularly older women, in the Church of England. In the image, the opened hand of Pearl is held out to greet the viewer to the table, which is a place of fellowship and hospitality; while the other women, Becky and Miriam, look on. The questions the icon raises, says Regan, are about what offering do you, the viewer, bring to the table? The colours the three women wear are also significant: they represent the Christian liturgical seasons, while the gold leaf is a symbol of the 'sainthood of all believers'.

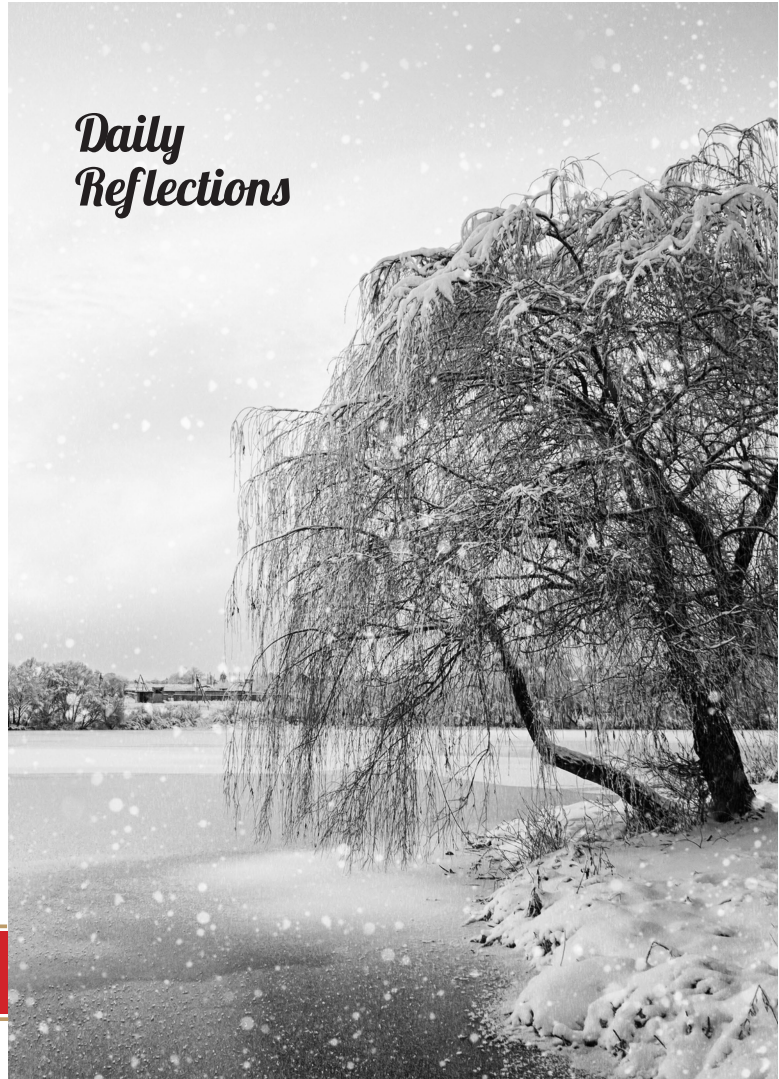
TAMASHA JEAN

This looks like a rather beautiful embrace; but in fact, it is an image laced in tragedy. Tamasha Jean, the child in the icon, is just five years old; and she is dead, a victim of the Hurricane Ike which hit Haiti in 2008. Regan says he was very moved by the photograph, which later won the Pulitzer Prize, showing Tamasha Jean and her father, Franz Samedi. It is, he says, a modern-day pieta.

LUCY

This icon shows Rev Lucy Winkett, the parish priest of St James's Church in Piccadilly in central London. It was commissioned by a school where she'd been a governor; it was created, says Regan, without her knowledge, but he managed to find out that her favourite bird was an eagle. The eagle is there partly to symbolise the ability of the gospels to give us wings and lift us up to the heavens, explains Regan; but in the icon its talons are cutting into Lucy's skin, which is a reminder that human life is always going to involve some suffering, some pain.

Daily
Reflections



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON REGAN O'CALLAGHAN'S WORK, PLEASE VISIT: WWW.REGANOCALLAGHAN.COM