

**York Minster Exhibition Feb 4 -March 4 2011**

## **In the Presence, paintings for a new season by Alison Thistlethwaite**

We live in a very physical world but most of us realise that not all life is physical. 'God is spirit', Jesus tells us, and while we act in the physical world, our transactions with God happen in a spiritual plane, spirit to spirit. We may use words, we may hear words, but the place of meeting, wherever we are physically, is a spiritual realm in which earth and heaven are connected.

Describing the place of prayer can often be difficult and can almost seem banal compared to the reality. Therefore art, following Christ's example, has often come at it through images and stories. The Prodigal Son story, for example, has been often painted as an analogy of what it is like meeting God. But the reality is something we have to take hold of for ourselves.

In the last century, an abstract language of art has been developed which, in some cases, has attempted to move beyond imagery to try to give the sense of spiritual states in themselves. Just as music can be 'like' worship and also call forth worship, abstract art can convey something of the feeling of the meeting place with God.

In medieval art, as in the great cathedrals, we often find the art forms seem saturated with a sense of the knowledge of God. This is often expressed through great beauty allied with almost shocking freedom. Today the experience of finding God in art is probably more rare, since artists have been more self-conscious about their beliefs and in any case, the tradition of modern art has been emotionally honest but largely hostile to faith. But its language is still very useful for exploring the place of the spirit.



Detail of 'Bursting Out' 2010

Ali Thistlethwaite has made these paintings in deliberate consciousness of the presence of God, and in the hope that something of this will transfuse the work and be a living testimony to the reality of God in art today. If we are asking ourselves 'what is this quality? Is it something mystical or that ordinary people can't see?' the answer is that it is not more mysterious than the sense of goodness, love and truth which we find in the world around us. But here she is looking directly to the source.

These paintings use an artistic language to express the place of heart-to-heart with God, but they also have their own subjects. Not all contact with God is about joy, worship and wellbeing. Some of it is about painful things in which he takes us by the hand into the depths of our own experience, or the tragic experiences of the world.

In prayer the world is transformed. Either we see things in a new way, or we are taught to act in a new way. These paintings often reflect a process of transformation which has taken place while the painting is being made. In the many layers of paint, an unfolding vision takes place in which pain and depth can be transformed into resolution and joy. The paintings therefore represent the many textured layers of life in which the worst experiences can be transformed into platforms for the best.

**David Thistlethwaite**