

CHRISTMAS 1, Dec. 30, 2018, Year C

- Henry Moore was perhaps the most well-known British sculptor of the 20th century. As happened with some American artists during WWII, Moore was engaged to use his artistic skills as part of his nation's war effort. His drawings of people sheltering in the London Tube tunnels during the bombing were compelling. And they had a great effect on a certain priest who was considering commissioning a sculpture. In particular, Henry Moore's way of depicting mothers holding their children struck this priest as indicating a great sensitivity. This led him to hire Moore to carve a large stone *Madonna and Child for St. Matthew's Northampton*.¹ {note handout}
- Though Henry Moore was *not* a practicing Christian, he was rather thoughtful about the spiritual dimension of this important commission. He was already making sculptures in a modern manner tending toward abstraction. And yet, he knew that *this piece had in some way to be different*. At the time, he wrote that, *unlike secular sculpture, this piece "could not be too abstract or it would have forgone the traditional deep meaning of the subject."* Here is how he described his thinking about the project:

I began thinking of the 'Madonna and Child' for St Matthew's by considering in what ways a Madonna and Child differs from a carving of just a 'Mother and Child' - that is by considering how in my opinion religious art differs from secular art. *It's not easy to describe in words what this difference is, except by saying in general terms that the 'Madonna and Child' should have an austerity and a nobility and some touch of grandeur (even [priestly] aloofness), which is missing in the 'everyday' Mother and Child idea.*²

- *Humanly accessible, and yet spiritually apart*, might be another way of capturing Henry Moore's thought here. Like some other artists, Moore achieves this human accessibility by building upon an important strand of

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Christian spirituality. *Mary provides and becomes our human connection with the incarnate Holy One.* In this sense, *Mary is not only the mother of our Lord, but also the mother of our faith.* Look at her posture, in this photo of Moore's sculpture. As I understand it, a person walking forward seeking to view this work up close, advances along an aisle that is *to the side of* the sculpture. And so, Mary's face and gaze engage the approaching viewer. This connection is therefore established *before* the visitor stands face to face with the representation of the Christ child. To extend this idea, *the Church as our mother, engages, upholds and supports us as we approach the mystery of Mary's God-given child.*

- We can learn from Henry Moore's insights as we consider a different way of expressing the significance of God's human incarnation. I am thinking of what we find in the words of the Gospels. Whereas Matthew and Luke share *–in story form–* aspects of *the meaning* of Jesus' birth, *John chooses an alternative way to convey the same truth.* Instead of *narrative*, John offers us something more like *poetry*, graced with philosophical depth. *To paraphrase Henry Moore, 'It's not easy to describe in words what this difference is... except by saying that the Prologue of John has an austerity and a nobility, and some touch of grandeur – even priestly aloofness...'*
- *Another parallel that we might discern between Henry Moore's Madonna and Child, and the first paragraphs of John's Gospel, can be found in the way that both have been and are received.* When this *Madonna and Child* was first displayed in its church setting, a few viewers found the work too abstract and not particularly religious. Some people have the same response to John's prologue, and particularly the first paragraph. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into

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being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

- Henry Moore realized that in choosing *specifically* to represent the Madonna and Christ Child rather than *any other* mother and her son, he had to find a way of expressing *the distinctive difference* between them. Here is how he later expressed it: "One problem lay in trying to make the child an intellectual looking child, that you could believe might have more of a future than just an ordinary baby."³ I think Moore clearly succeeded in meeting this challenge. Yet, for those of us who *by our upbringing* expect religion and spiritual experience to be centered in emotions and feelings, both Moore and John's Prologue might leave us cold! *If this is true* for us, the limitation has more to do with *our expectations* than with any shortcoming in Henry Moore or the Gospel writer John.
- *One measure* by which we can appreciate how people over the decades have been moved by Henry Moore's *Madonna and Child* can be seen in this photo of the sculpture. *Notice the Madonna's knees* ~ and how generations of people have been drawn to *touching and even rubbing* them. *For we always want to touch the throne. This beautiful sculpture moves people to come near and not simply see it. It moves us physically to engage it and interact with it.* Intentionally engaging John's first paragraphs can have the same effect on us. ~> *Read them slowly. Savor them. Let them sink into your consciousness, and they will change you. They will deepen your prayers, just as Moore's sculpture has enriched the spiritual lives of so many.* For what some might describe as *the intellectual quality of both* has nevertheless *inspired people to love them* ~ not simply admire them, but actually *to love them* with a similar passion.
- *Both John's Prologue and Henry Moore's Madonna and Child help us see the beauty of this reality* ~ that "the Word became flesh and lived among us,

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and [that] we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace..."⁴ Both John's visionary insight, and Henry Moore's human sensitivity are well expressed in the words of our Collect this morning: "Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen."



Henry Moore, *Madonna and Child* (1943-4)

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Notes:

¹ See the Tate Gallery website ~ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/henry-moore-om-ch-maquette-for-madonna-and-child-r1147455> ~ accessed 27Dec18.

² Henry Moore, letter to Walter Hussey, 26 August 1943, cited on the Tate Gallery website, noted above. (The word 'priestly' in square brackets replaces Moore's use of the word 'hieratic'.)

³ *ibid.*

⁴ From our Gospel reading from John, quoted above.