

An Icon of St John

St John's Parish Church had an artist in residence in June: Karen Blampied, who is 'writing' an icon of the church's patron saint, St John the Baptist. It is one of twelve icons – one of each parish's patronal saint – that she is completing this year. She spoke to ALASDAIR CROSBY about her project.

'ICON' and 'iconic': they are some of the most over-used words of our times, now used to describe everything from Marmite to Michael Jackson, with a loose meaning of 'popular', or 'trend-setting', just as nowadays, 'awesome' might mean... well, who knows?

The more thoughtful use of icon and iconic is to describe something that is inspirational or symbolic – a reference to the original Greek word, (eikon), meaning a religious image, a style of devotional art that is especially venerated in Eastern Orthodoxy Christianity.

The Island has a contemporary iconographer, Karen Blampied, who is currently on a pilgrimage – a pilgrimage to each one of the Island's twelve parish churches. In each church she is painting an icon of the patron saint. Recently she was in St John's Church, to paint an icon of St John the Baptist (or St John the Forerunner, as he is known in Eastern Orthodoxy).

'You participate in an icon,' she said, 'or you write



an icon - you don't "paint" it. A western religious painting simply "spectates"; an icon is an invitation into a statement of faith.'

Hence the intensive use of symbolism – not only in the details of the icon, but also in everything to do with the writing of an icon.

'You start with a base of dark colour,' she explained, 'and you put layer upon layer of lighter colour, as in climbing the mountain of the Resurrection. Writing an icon is a passion process.'

'The paints are all naturally occurring pigments. Even the painting solution is egg yolk, water – life-giving elements – and vinegar, as offered to Christ as He hung on the Cross, an icon, just like life, is made up of many deaths and resurrections.'

When Christianity first came to Jersey, the new Island faith was much influenced by Celtic Christianity, itself derived from the early form that Christianity took in Greece and the Near East rather than by that associated more with Rome. And so she feels that writing icons in Jersey is an entirely authentic activity as well as a recollection of the Island's ancient history.

This early history is recalled by the dedications of the Island's parish churches. Why the church of St John should be dedicated to 'St John of the Oaks' (St Jean des Chênes) is not known. Perhaps it is something as simple as there once being lots of oaks in the vicinity, or perhaps the church is sited on what had once been a pagan grove.

The St John icon portrays the saint in his rough camel-hair coat, his hand upraised – the iconographical symbolism that he was a teacher and



orator. Below his feet a rough mountaintop – he came to 'make the way straight'.

So far she has finished icons of St Brelade and Trinity. The St Brelade icon portrays this early Celtic Christian missionary perhaps called Bren Gwaldr – Bren the Leader – who was a companion of St Sampson, and who was, it seems, 'dropped off' in Jersey by him before going on to Guernsey. Bran Gwaldr probably lived in a small beehive hut near the site of the present parish church, and these huts, as well as other Christian symbolism, feature in her icon.

The Trinity icon is inspired by the famous fifteenth-century Russian icon by Andrei Rublev depicting the three angels who visit Abraham at the oak of Mamre, but which is generally interpreted as being an icon of the Holy Trinity. Karen's icon will hang in the parish church, thanks to an anonymous donation given to her for this purpose. She would very much like all her icons to hang in the respective parish churches, but understands this hope might be affected adversely by the limitations of spending imposed by the current recession.

Karen trained and taught as a secondary school art teacher in Jersey, but had to give up teaching because of a health problem. She first became inspired by icons when studying Pastoral Theology in

London, and living in a Russian Orthodox house where each room had its 'icon corner'.

For me,' she said, 'the orthodox icon offers a profound way in which to express my Christian faith. My spiritual director encouraged me to use iconography as a spiritual journey.'

She embarked on a religious studies course at Leuven University in Belgium; she worked in the Roman Catholic Church in Jersey for 17 years as coordinator of catechesis, and embarked on a five-year course in iconography.

In 2008 she set up Iconspirit Studios to fulfil her passion for writing icons.

By December she will have done the round of Jersey's twelve parish churches, and all the icons will be collected together for an exhibition to be held at All Saints' Church from 2 to 19 December.

From the twelve parish churches, the icons will comprise twelve religious lessons told in visual art form, a message to the Jersey of today from the saints of each parish community whom she wants to make visible once again in the twenty-first century – an endeavour that is indeed truly iconic, and a message that is indeed truly awesome.

[Karen's website has further details:
www.iconspirit.com](http://www.iconspirit.com)



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