

Threads Through the Bible

JACQUI PARKINSON



Textile artist Jacqui Parkinson shares her story of creativity through the creation of 'The Big Story' from Creation to Revelation.

ALL CREATIVE PEOPLE

'I'm not creative!' So many people say that to me. But I believe, just as we're made in God's image, each and every one of us has a creative spark.

Creative endeavours, for those involved and those on the receiving end, can be inspirational. I think creativity's essential for everyone to live well together, and it can take so many interesting forms: baking is great for those cooking and a blessing to those being fed. Time spent gardening and flower arranging can lift the spirt, and provide others with space and reflection. Drama, film, dance and mime, can extend personal boundaries and delight audiences. Hours of fun can be enjoyed while gaining the necessary skills for different crafts, and engaging others in the practice. If we delight in composing, playing, or listening to music, it can inspire us to live imaginatively, and in singing with others we can discover collectively the joy of blended voices. Then writing books and novels, which stimulate new ideas and thoughts, can open up potential new worlds to hundreds of people.

In our leisure, work, and relationships, we can all aim to be creative. We can also explore the 'arts' as part of our lives. They can please and delight us, interest and intrigue us, challenge and, maybe, even alarm us, leaving us all changed.

MY CREATIVE JOURNEY

My first 'proper job' was teaching theatre studies at a secondary school where I realised the value of educational drama, allowing young people to express themselves through their voices and bodies, and also enabling them to work together as one group to find resolutions in difficult situations. Then, running the Lantern Arts Centre in south London, it was wonderful to see children and adults flourish as they gained new skills and confidence, while working towards performances.

After many years, I turned from drama to stitching, took a degree in Embroidered Textiles, and began a



more solitary creative endeavour. Sometimes we're fortunate enough to be given a moment that, in retrospect, we can see was life changing. Sometimes we're fortunate enough to have several. For me, one such moment was seeing the huge paintings of Marc Chagall in Vence, in France. As I looked at them, I thought 'I want to do large scale, Bible based, work like that.'

My series of relatively small exhibitions, commissioned by the Deo Gloria Trust, had been shown, and enjoyed by many, in lots of cathedrals but I wanted to bring more drama into my stitching. The larger exhibitions I now work on are comparable to set designs and, like theatre plays, they carry a story. My hope is they'll have a greater impact on visitors and will inspire, delight, intrigue, challenge - and even alarm some viewers. My hope is that they will leave us all changed.

FOLLOWING IN A TRADITION

While there's a long tradition of women stitching ecclesiastical embroideries for the church, there's a stronger relationship, for me and my work, with stained glass windows, which I've always found engaging. Although the materials used are very different, the bright coloured glass, captured in-between black lead lines, connects with my textiles. Originally, most stained glass church windows were created to inspire the illiterate with stories from the Bible, in a language that everyone could understand. My aim is also to make easily accessible art for those who might not know the Bible stories.

LIFE-LONG INSPIRATION

My inspiration always comes from the Bible, which I love. When I decided to give my life to Jesus as a teenager, I was given a New Testament which I scribbled all over with questions, associated thoughts, concepts I found difficult, and ideas that inspired me.

For my first large scale project, I decided to tackle the book of Revelation because it's a picture book and I've always enjoyed the idea that the Bible ends with a story and a vision rather than a theological treatise. I didn't realise the minefield I was entering into! Studying the various views on John's visions was both challenging and illuminating but finally I accepted the fact that the Bible ends with a lot of mystery - which is appropriate!

REVELATION

Threads through Revelation, comprises fourteen huge panels, took three years to complete and toured fourteen cathedrals from 2016 to 2018. The book of Revelation isn't exactly high on most people's reading list, yet about half a million visitors engaged with it. I thought this exhibition was going to be the one and only exhibition but, having looked at the end of what I like to call 'The Big Story', I began to think about the beginning of the story in Genesis - another 'picture book'. A little daunting, because I'd never stitched an animal - except for the four mystical creatures around the throne room of God in Revelation - but it's always good to learn something new.



CREATION

Threads through Creation took another three years' work with twelve huge panels re-imagining the creation story. I wanted to start this exhibition with the first words in the Bible, 'In the beginning God ...'. While I think science has a lot of important things to say about the world we live in, I wanted to make it clear that the Bible's emphasis is on a Creator God, who is one but also three, Father - Jesus - Holy Spirit. This panel took ages to design. Originally, I used three circles from a Venn diagram - each of the circles having their 'own space', overlapping in pairs, and then with a focal point together at the centre. But, no matter how I placed the design down, there was always one circle at the top or at the bottom and I wanted to show the Trinity as 'equal'. Each one more than happy to step back or step forward as required. Eventually, I used a spiral for my design which isn't totally satisfactory because, while it never ends, it does have a beginning. It's good enough. The spiral's split into three sections to represent the Trinity and on top of the spiral, stitched in black thread, are outlines of images following the six 'days' of creation. In the beginning just God - everything created, birthed, from inside the Creator.

The creation story is an easily approachable subject for those of all ages, packed with recognisable creatures of all shapes and sizes, and important messages of caring for the world in which we live. The bright, action packed, panels have a big impact on visitors, and thousands of schoolchildren have been involved in related workshops. It'll finish its tour of twenty one cathedrals and great churches at the end of 2024. It's been a real blessing and utter delight to know how many people have been touched by it in so many different ways.

CROSS

Threads through the Cross was essential to complete the Big Story. Another dramatic sequence in fabric connecting the 'all is good' at the start of the story - with the 'all is not good' of the middle - finally to the 'all is good again' at the end of the story. The life and death of Jesus is crucial for the story, and our lives, to make sense.

So I've spent the past two years working on eighteen huge panels covering scenes from the life of Jesus: starting with the birth of Jesus through to his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension - and finally, the day of Pentecost. I've placed together some particular images in pairs to encourage viewers to see the connections, such as the baptism and temptation of Jesus, the ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and the



overthrow of the Temple tables, the woman washing the feet of Jesus and Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

One of the major challenges of Threads through the Cross has been depicting people. I'd only previously worked with a few figures like Adam and Eve but on the Last Supper panel there are thirteen figures. Then, Jesus is on every panel - except for the empty tomb! But I persevered, and gradually worked out ways that produced a good enough result within the constraints of fabric and stitch. One vital thing has been to go to life classes and, while drawing with a pencil, paying attention to details of human anatomy. I then based the facial features on icons with large, distinctive eyes. You can't be

precise with fabric, but hopefully I've achieved a certain degree of believable accuracy with the cronky figures.

REVELATION - CREATION - CROSS - TOURING TOGETHER

Starting at Liverpool Cathedral in January 2025, we'll be touring Threads through the Bible, all 44 huge panels starting in Genesis, through the Gospels, to Revelation. My passion is to express the story of the Bible, from the start to the end of the Big Story. And there are lots of images that resonate through the whole sequence of panels and connect the three exhibitions: such as the lamb that leaves the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve is seen again at the birth of Jesus. I'm hoping that Threads through the Bible will attract thousands of people to enjoy the story and be moved by it. Perhaps you, with friends, will be some of them!



JACQUI PARKINSON

Jacqui was born in Manchester. Married to Rob Frost for 32 years they had two sons, Andy and Chris. Having lived most of her life in south London Jacqui now lives in Devon with her second husband Andrew.

PRAYER FOCUS

CREATIVITY: Give thanks for God's gift of creativity of all kinds; time and space in busy lives to explore hidden and latent gifts of creativity; people's eyes to be opened to the endless possibilities of creative expression to share the Gospel message in visual and accessible ways, especially to those who have difficulty in relating to the written word and verbal communication. (Exodus 31:1-6; Psalm 149:3).

CHURCH ISSUES: Local Churches: To become increasingly aware of the need to find a greater depth of faith; an urgency to come to God in prayer seeking his will for individual churches, a re-kindling of the work of the Holy Spirit and empowerment and acceptance in the use of the gifts of the Spirit. (Acts 1:8; 2 Timothy 4:1-5).

NATIONAL ISSUES: Social Reform: Creative solutions to deal with the rising crisis in mental health services; the prison system and all who work in it -

especially chaplains & James Timpson, minister in charge of prisons; the criminal justice system; integrity and uprightness of all serving in the police force. (Romans 15:1-2; Proverbs 10:12).

TERRORISM: Perpetrators of terror to encounter God; victims to find the peace of the Lord; change to regimes across the world encouraging acts of terror; cyber-attacks and international espionage. (Psalm 34:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

WORLD ISSUES: Planet in Crisis: Repentance for our abuse of the planet - our ravaging of its resources, destruction of eco-systems, pollution of the land and sea; our 'throw away' society especially in the west and a greater commitment to re-cycling & up-cycling; worldwide commitment to reduce carbon emissions; the pioneering of new technologies to reduce emissions and the political will to make it happen (Isaiah 24:4-6; Jeremiah 12:4).