

### Isaiah 52, 13 - 15

- <sup>13</sup> See, my servant shall prosper;  
he shall be exalted and lifted up,  
and shall be very high.
- <sup>14</sup> Just as there were many who were astonished at him  
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,  
and his form beyond that of mortals—
- <sup>15</sup> so he shall startle many nations;  
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;  
for that which had not been told them they shall see,  
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

### Isaiah 53. 1 - 7

- <sup>1</sup> Who has believed what we have heard?  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
- <sup>2</sup> For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
- <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
- <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.
- <sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.
- <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.
- <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

Reading these passages from the Book of the prophet Isaiah, it is not hard to see why the early church interpreted them as referring to Jesus' horrific death by crucifixion. Some of the language used may help us to approach the difficult and uncomfortable interpretation of the crucifixion in Michele Coxon's "The Naked Christ".

The easiest response, of course, is to walk away in revulsion. Crucifixion was designed to be excruciatingly painful and humiliating. Victims were nailed up naked as objects of deterrence and disgust. Our natural response is to look away, which is why, historically, there have been so few realistic depictions of Jesus on the cross. Artists, or more particularly their patrons, wanted images that inspired devotion, and that meant they had to be "softened" enough to spend time with.

Mary, and the others who watched Jesus die, had no option but to stay with the very real horror of the slow and agonising death of a dear son and friend. If staying there was unbearable, walking away was unthinkable.

We must avoid the temptation to get sidetracked by the obvious: Jesus' body could not have decayed that much in three hours. We are not automatically expected to "read" the sculpture literally. We could, however, be challenged to think whether there were any limits to the human sin and decadence that Christians believe were put to death on the cross in and through Jesus, and whether this sculpture is exploring one way of representing that.

The difficult, and most important, question that "The Naked Christ" asks of us is this: how long can we bear to stay in the presence of suffering, especially when we are helpless to do anything about it? Tsunami, earthquake, flood or bomb – we are faced with suffering almost every time we switch the television on or open a newspaper. The only power we seem to have is to switch it off. Faced with our own powerlessness to stop the world's pain we begin to share something of the deep, agonised love that Mary, Jesus' mother experienced as she watched her son die.

Suffering – our own and others – is heartbreaking. We have two options when faced with it. The first is to allow the emotional scar tissue to harden, encasing us in brittle and fearful security, shutting the world out. The other option, the road less travelled, is to keep our hearts open, the wound exposed, so that it might fill instead with God's own love and healing.

Any sculpture or painting about the death of Jesus can only ever be a partial exploration of the complex layers of meaning and interpretation through which Christians view the story of the crucifixion. "The Naked Christ" makes no claims to say everything there is to say about it either, but it does ask difficult questions of us. We might have to learn to live with the discomfort of not having them easily answered.



It's hard to reconcile the Michele Coxon who sculpted Christ in agony on the cross with the artist who paints fluffy kittens. She is one of Britain's best loved children's illustrators, and her books with their delightful stories and illustrations have sold over a million copies worldwide.

Her sculpture 'The Naked Christ' emerges like a protest against her sentimental animal books, and she was quite pleased with the Shropshire Star editorial that compared her crucifixion to a "decomposing corpse dug up from a mass grave in Bosnia". This outburst prompted some equally earnest responses in the Shropshire Star's Letters section.

Born in Folkestone, Kent and educated in London Michele has always drawn and painted since childhood. At 16 she enrolled at the Royal Leamington School of Art. Michele Coxon certainly falls into the exception category, with a career history which has taken her to the USSR as a nanny and teacher of art and craft; to Ireland to look after horses; Africa studying and drawing wildlife; Wales tagging seal pups, and to Scotland to guard rare osprey for the RSPB, Meeting her late husband, warden of a bird reserve in the Outer Hebrides and wildlife author, gave her the opportunity to paint and draw from nature and to illustrate his first book 'World of an Island' But it wasn't until years later and after writing and illustrating 16 books she was able to go back to college and study sculpture.

As part of her sculpture course, at Shrewsbury College of Art and Design, Michele learnt the techniques of welding metal, working with textiles and ceramic. "After years of working with a 00 brush, and confined to a tight chocolate-box subject, it was like releasing another person – a rush of creative energy. I saw the countryside on my walks in a different light. Instead of pretty flowers and peaceful hills I saw nature's natural cycle of death and decay. I walk and watch as the seasons change and mankind's rubbish is taken back into the earth to rot."



*The Naked Christ: by Michele Coxon*