

# Noli Me Tangere – Do not cling to me!

*Article originally published in Oremus, March 2016.*

The Paschal Candle has been decorated by Rachel Alem for the last 5 years. It is a work that she looks forward to every year as it helps her to prepare the way for the Risen Christ. It helps her to enter Lent, looking towards the finale of the 40 day journey that we have all set out on. After all, it is easier to go somewhere if you know where you are trying to go to!

Here, Rachel shares with us some of her thoughts for this year's design and what has inspired her.

When I was studying Fine Art, many years ago, I was fortunate to hear the then director of the National Gallery, Neil MacGregor, give a talk in which he spoke about a painting by Titian, the Noli Me Tangere.

It was a very moving episode, how during the Second World War, while London was besieged by bombs, the museum's trustees decided that one picture per month would hang "as the only Old Master picture in the National Gallery" to share with the people of London the vicissitudes of war.

This Titian, in which Christ, admonishes Mary Magdalene after his resurrection not to touch him, was voted for by the public as the one it most wanted to see.

But why did the people choose this painting?

Neil Macgregor said: We can only guess, but I think what it meant to the war-torn Londoners must have been close to the central poetic truth that Titian was originally trying to express—the reassurance of a love so strong that it can survive death.

This touched me very deeply and images of this episode have always caught my interest. So this year, as I was thinking about the fire and candle as it enters the Cathedral and its symbolism: the entrance of Jesus Christ, Our Light, into the darkness of our lives, in this Extraordinary Jubilee Year dedicated to Mercy, I felt strongly that it would be fitting to show this remarkable meeting, as Jesus Christ meets with Mary Magdalene - this first recorded appearance of the Risen Christ, known as the Noli Me Tangere. (cf. Jn 20: 11).

Isn't it strange that the first person meeting the Risen Christ is not his Mother, or St Peter, or any other credible witness? Jesus chooses a woman, a sinner. St Luke speaks of Mary Magdalene as having been freed from 7 demons, wickedness inhabiting her that she had no power over (Lk 8:2). Mary Magdalene is the first to meet Jesus, is the first to hear his voice and respond to him. This can give us great hope! Hope in the inexhaustible mercy of our God! The sinner is the first to meet Christ!

Mary Magdalene is the first to hear his words: “Noli me tangere”. This is Latin, meaning, *Do not cling to me*. Isn't this puzzling?

If we look to the Way of Mercy, to the 6<sup>th</sup> Station: Mercy Incarnate, we find an icon of the Resurrection. Jesus stands holding up his glorious cross and a woman, dressed in scarlet reaches towards him. The woman is Eve, reaching towards her son as he comes to liberate her from Hell.

On the Paschal Candle we see the Risen Christ is holding up his cross, and a woman, Mary Magdalene, dressed in scarlet is reaching out to him.

Mary Magdalene in this moment has the same position as Eve in the resurrection icon. The Magdalene symbolises the new Eve, the Church, the Bride of Christ. But not in the usual, human, physical way of marriage. Marriage is the most beautiful sign foreshadowing the relationship that God desires to have with his people. But Christ's words “Noli me tangere, *Do not cling to me*, point us to our Promised Land, to Heaven. What we are called to is a relationship with Jesus Christ, so intimate its closest likeness on earth is marriage, but it doesn't consist of the uniting of bodies, it consists of the unity of spirit.

Jesus says to the Magdalene, “Do not cling to me, because I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (Jn 20:17) He tells her, the least credible witness, to announce to the Apostles this strange phrase: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

That the effect of the Resurrection is that the Father that Jesus has spoken of throughout his earthly mission is now Our Father, his God is Our God. We are no longer shrouded in darkness, we have been brought into full communion with the Trinity itself. We have a Father who loves us with a love stronger than death.

We are no longer waiting in darkness, estranged from one another, unable to see or feel anything except ourselves. By the light of the Risen Christ, our candles are lit, the Cathedral becomes ablaze with a new light, we see each other, we can see ourselves, we are not alone, we have a means to move forward to enter into the new year with Christ lighting our way, with Christ alight in our hearts.

*Rachel Alem*