



Holy Spirit Frontal

By Hilary Tinley – January 2017

Two years ago Canon Jacqui asked me to design and make a new nave altar frontal to be used at services of the Holy Spirit, that is at Pentecost and at Confirmations. But how can we depict the Holy Spirit? By nature He is invisible.

Traditionally, the Spirit is likened to a dove 'and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him' Matt 3.v16 or a fire 'Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance' Acts 2.v3.

But the Spirit is present everywhere and at all times, so I looked for a wider, more inclusive symbol and 'went large' in choosing the universe. As one of three Persons of the Trinity, the Spirit is indivisible from God the Creator 'Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible'. Looking at images of celestial bodies, they showed me the un-tamable power of God, far removed from man's control or influence. When I came across a famous image of V838 Monocerotis, photographed by the Hubble telescope in 2006 it seemed to fit the bill. Here was a relatively new image of an exploding super nova surrounded by a cloud of red dust (the liturgical colour for Pentecost) with a photographic effect that made the stars appear to extend into a Cross. I enlarged a central section to the dimensions of the frontal and discussed possible textile techniques with other members of the Minster Needlework Guild.

As we began to work on the design, tracing and marking it up to the required size, another connection emerged. Someone quoted Carl Sagan, a New Age scientist active in the 1960s, who wrote, "the nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff". This resonated so strongly with me that I took to humming a verse from the song 'Woodstock',

We are stardust, we are golden,

And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden".

I read that Joni Mitchell, who wrote 'Woodstock' in 1969, wasn't able to get to the music festival but saw it on television and likened it to the Garden of Eden. That's quite enough of an attempted analogy to our Church life, but I must plead being a teenager at that time, and thus sentimental about the songs of my youth! And, as Jacqui preached on Sunday 8 January, when the cloth was Blessed, "draw us into the mystery of Your presence from far beyond the furthest star to the closeness of the breath of our being".

We worked on the cloth in ten square sections to make it possible to machine down Merino wool, strands of which were spread on the dark blue furnishing fabric to give the effect of cosmic dust. Guild members learned how to attach shisha mirror glass circles in the traditional Indian way to give pinpoints of light for the smallest stars. When the sections were joined and the larger stars were applied it became more difficult to work as a group and I had to use all my experience to stitch by hand and machine as the frontal took shape. As we tried placing it on the altar table we were surprised and delighted at the effects we had achieved.

There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit was with us.

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