

22nd October 2020

Ruined

**“With ruin upon ruin, rout upon rout,
Confusion worse confounded.”**

John Milton, Paradise Lost

When I found Milton’s words again – “ruin upon ruin”, and “confusion worse confounded” – one specific story came to mind.

Noli Me Tangere (Touch me not) is a painting by Graham Sutherland in the Mary Magdalene Chapel in Chichester Cathedral. Completed in 1961, it depicts the moment described in John’s Gospel when Mary Magdalene meets the risen Christ. Weeping outside his tomb, she mistakes Jesus for the gardener and asks him where they have put the body. But when Jesus speaks, she realises it is her Lord. “Don’t cling to me,” Jesus says, “because I have not yet gone up to the Father.” The first part of this in Latin, *Noli me tangere*, gave Sutherland the painting’s title. Jesus’ straw hat (also used by Rembrandt in his painting of the same subject) helps explain why Mary thinks he is the gardener. And Jesus is shown ascending a staircase, indicating he is already on the way to heaven.

The painting was controversial in its time, too graphic, colourful, “secular” and modern for some. So much so that in 1963 it was attacked and torn by a woman stabbing it with a ball-point pen. Confusion reigned! The picture was ruined. Or so many thought ... But with careful restoration in skilled hands the damage was repaired. You have to look hard now to see where the tear is. Indeed, I wouldn’t have noticed it unless it had been pointed out to me and the pitiful story related.

Ruined? Not for me! For the painting, the beauty, the message, the purpose is still there. The damage only adds to its story – and meaning.

Your life and mine can be damaged by many things, including attacks by people who don’t like what we are, or say, or stand for. But are we ruined? Never! We may carry the marks of the harm, but we still have meaning to share and a message to portray in all its vibrancy. We may be confounded for a time, but we are *never* ruined. No misguided attack can destroy what we truly are. Indeed, it might even add to the story we tell ...

A prayer for today

By the world’s ills, I carry many scars. By your grace, I’m restored to wholeness. Amen.

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