

The Nature of Bearing Witness: Sainte Chapelle, the Nazis and Palestine

There are four horsemen, but are they the apocalyptic equestrians? Someone holds up a pair of scales, but are they a Temple money-changer or an angel weighing souls? The winter sun is shining brightly through some of the tall stained glass windows of [Sainte Chapelle](#) but I am not entirely sure what I am seeing. The guide-books gives the images names, but what does it all mean?

The 15 tall windows from the mid 13th century with one large rose window depict hundreds of scenes from biblical narrative. They are telling stories in the simplest pictograms – cartoons. We are usually told that like most ecclesiastical art they are there as moral aide memoires, a visual ethical prompt for a largely illiterate age. But, of course, they are more than that.

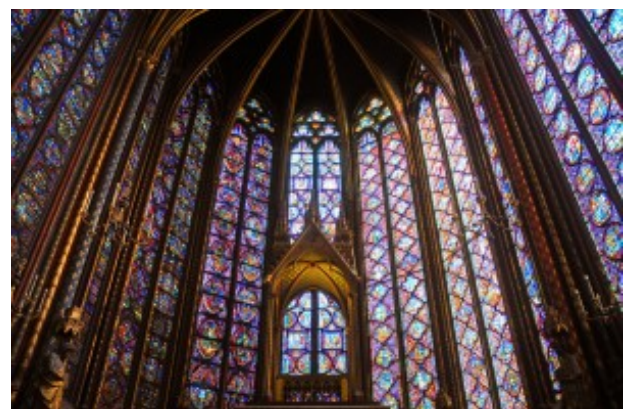
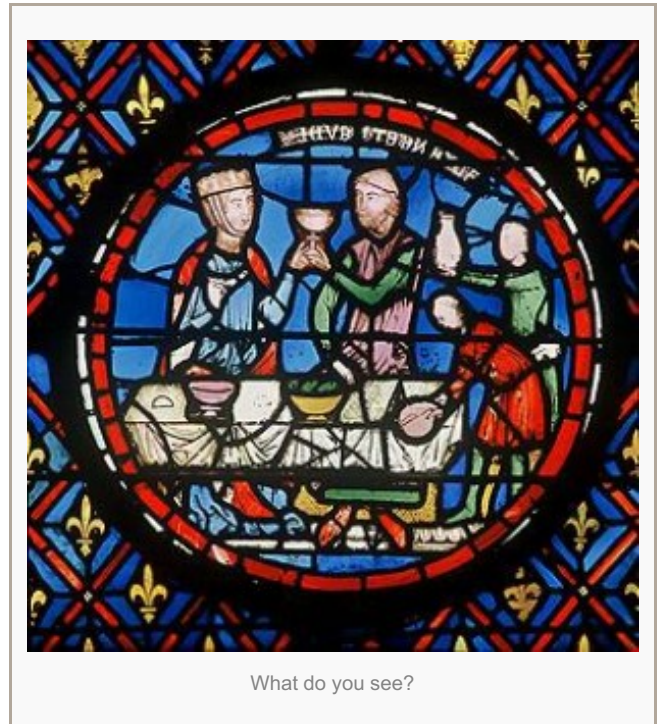
In the case of this wonderful 13th century private Royal chapel they firstly bear witness to the stature of Louis IX who wanted to demonstrate his wealth and his leadership of Christian Europe. However, they are more than a display of power. This extraordinary gothic space was built as a reliquary for his precious religious souvenirs.

Visitors were supposed to be impressed at a material and spiritual level. The windows were the narrative framework to the King's devotion to other physical objects, supposed relics of the Passion, that in turn bore witness to the tangible reality of the Christian faith. Though one suspects that many of these relics were of doubtful provenance that does not matter. The devotion shown to the objects bore witness to the faith of those who paid homage to them in an age when modern scientific ideas such as empirical reportage or evidence-based policy making were still to come.

But as you strain your neck and eyes to see, let alone interpret, these stories as they stretch up to the vaulting ceilings, it is difficult to understand fully in what way they were originally witnessed. Literally, physically, how did people see them? Alone, in candle-light, as a guided-tour? Without lenses how could they make out the detail? And in what way were they appreciated? What message was taken away?

Overall, the effect is overwhelming – a room of multi-coloured walls. Some of the detail is also spellbinding. A helmeted knight holds the wrist of a King dressed in pink and green sitting on a golden throne. In the knight's other chain-mailed hand a broad silver sword is clearly about to strike. The look on the King's face is frozen in fear over centuries. History comes alive and demands attention. But from whom and why?

Perhaps most visitors to this chapel were already familiar with the stories and the imagery was there to delight



and provoke further reflection. I am sure that easy parallels could have been drawn by contemporaries between the stained glass biblical stories of the destruction of Jerusalem and a Christian Europe threatened by expansionist Islam, for example. Why choose to feature so many tales of Kings from the Bible if one wasn't supposed to compare and contrast with contemporary rulers?

Or perhaps it was just décor for a room where the Royal Family could escape from the hurly-burly of the early medieval metropolis. If they had guests who joined them there, it may be that the religious observance that they shared had more to do with their political host than the sacred.

I find that difficult to believe. So much investment in something that bears witness and so clearly seeks to provoke a response from the viewer, must have had a moral and material purpose. Whether it actually has that intended effect depends partly on what the viewer brings to the process. We are now separated from the real meaning of those windows by time. However, even contemporaries would have had varied reactions. Let me explain further by bringing this Parisian parable up to date.

As you amble around the streets of the inner Arrondissements of Paris there are signs on the walls of the primary schools that commemorate the Jewish children taken by the Nazis 'with the complicity of Vichy'. Those signs are a way of reminding passers-by that these were places of horror as well as innocence. They mark a dark spot on the historical map of Paris, but I expect they are also there in the hope that memory teaches us future lessons. Don't make the same mistakes! Never again!

But what you see when you stand in front of that sign depends on many things. My grandfather was shot by a French resistance fighter in Paris in 1943. He was a quarter-master for the occupying German army. Many of my wife's family did not escape from the Nazis and died in similar concentration camps to those that received the French schoolchildren. On our weekend trip to Paris and into the past, we find ourselves standing in the same place reading the same sign, but as parts of different narratives.



On the Eurostar train back from Paris two young female students are having quite a bitter row. One is reading an Arab memoir about Palestine. The other is reading Esther Waters by George Moore. They are both clearly intelligent, concerned young adults. The second says that she couldn't read 'a book like that' unless it 'came to a conclusion and told you what you could do about it'. The other said that she was reading it because she wanted to understand the issues better before thinking about acting. They were both looking for a sign, but had different approaches to the act of bearing witness.

Ultimately, it seems that to move on from mere spectatorship towards some kind of response or even action is the real meaning of bearing witness. This is why it's so difficult for journalists who report on war or suffering, but then feel constrained by their codes of objectivity from 'doing something' about it. The desire to bear witness and bring others to witness through communication remains a complex process at the heart of the human condition over centuries. From stained glass to YouTube we can send out a sign, but it requires another to turn it into an action.

[This blog is respectfully dedicated to [Marie Colvin](#), who paid the ultimate price for bearing witness as a war correspondent. I have written about her, with lots of links to tributes and examples of her work, [here](#)]

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