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Piety and Charity in the Painted Glass of late Medieval York

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What messages can the images in medieval churches give us about the motivations of their donors? When a wealthy medieval man or woman donated a statue or painted glass window or altar hanging to their parish church, such a gift would have been prompted by a mixture of motives, including a desire to remind passers-by to pray for their souls and probably a fair amount of self-advertisement. However, it is the contention of this paper that, frequently, the choice of a particular *image* used in the donation would be selected with careful thought and have its roots in the donor's particular personal piety. The messages they were thus sending about their personal beliefs may have been instantly readable to their fellow parishioners, but these days require some translation before they can be fully grasped.

This paper investigates the spiritual and secular motivations of a family of donors of some unique painted glass windows at All Saints, North Street parish church in York. The windows of the church offer a wealth of unusual later medieval glass, including a depiction of six of the Corporal Acts of Mercy; St Anne teaching the Virgin to read and the northern poem 'The Prick of Conscience'. This paper will concentrate on exploring one family's donations to the church. It argues that their choice of iconographic material and the act of donating the windows were part of the donors' larger concern for maintaining the social fabric. The same concerns were expressed both in charitable acts during their lives and in their last will and testaments. It is

suggested that such donations form part of a new and internalised piety and thoughtful charity inspired by more than the customs of the day.

The two windows at All Saints, North Street that will concentrated on here are known as the Blackburn window and the Corporal Acts of Mercy window. Both were donated to the church during a busy period of fenestration in the early fifteenth century by members of the Blackburn family, members of the mercantile oligarchy of later medieval York. Nicholas Blackburn senior arrived in York from Richmond at the beginning of the century, chose his wife Margaret from another wealthy mercantile family, and by 1412 had become mayor of the city for the first time (he achieved the mayoralty again in 1429). He and Margaret had five children, but it is his second son – Nicholas junior, confusingly also married to a Margaret – who followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a member of the civic government and joining his parents as a parishioner at All Saints, North Street.

The Blackburn window – now in the east window of the church – is made up of three main lights. In the north is a depiction of St John the Baptist, in the south, St Christopher, and in the centre light is the Virgin Mary being taught to read by St Anne. The positioning places the emphasis in the window on Anne rather than her daughter since it is she, and not the Virgin, who is the same size as the figures on either side of them. Thus the iconography of the window is that of a row of saints rather than distinctly Marian. The motif of St Anne teaching the Virgin to read was an extremely popular one in England in the later middle ages. It seems to have appeared in the later years of the thirteenth century and gradually increased in popularity in the fourteenth. This coincided with the marriage of Richard II of England to Anne of

Bohemia in 1382 and the authorisation of the cult of St Anne in a decree of Pope Urban VI, which was especially addressed to England, in 1383.¹ The North Street window can be dated to between 1417 and 1427. There is no reference in the apocryphal gospels to St Anne teaching Mary to read, indeed it directly conflicts with their account of Mary being taught in the Temple.

Although it was a popular subject, the North Street glass is unusual in that it is possible to read the text on the book with which St Anne is teaching, and which is extremely long. The text is in Latin and can be translated as 'Hear my prayer, O Lord, and with Thine ears consider my calling'². Other inscription in the window is concentrated about the figures of the four donors. Nicholas and Margaret junior kneel, looking inwards towards the altar, in the lower north light. She kneels at a desk draped with an embroidered white cloth and holds in her hand a book inscribed 'D(omi)ne ne in furore tuo arguas me neq(ue) i(n) ira tua' (O Lord, rebuke me not in Thine indignation neither rebuke in Thy displeasure)³ while in the south light the older couple also kneel and look inwards. The inscription on the book of Margaret senior echoes the 51st Psalm: 'D(omi)ne labia mea aperies et os meu(m)' (Lord open mine lips, and my mouth shall shew thy praise)⁴. There are also inscriptions identifying the four donors and requesting prayers for their souls.

It is unusual to find such a large amount of text in one window. In the majority of the depictions of St Anne teaching the Virgin to read, the book used would be left blank or covered with only a few letters or meaningless strokes. The North Street glass is only approached in length of legible text by the Fitzwarin Psalter and the Musee de Cluny frontal, which is of a rather earlier date and which

Norton, Binski and Parks have been able to connect to the Dominican Order in East Anglia.⁵ They have suggested that the Musée de Cluny frontal reflects the Dominican concern for learning and the written word in the legibility and length of the text on the Virgin's book. It is true that the Friars Preachers were very concerned with education. According to the Constitutions of the Order, no Priory could be set up without a Lector or Doctor of theology, in order that each house could also function as a school. The Dominican Priory in York possessed thirty-four cells, each with a study, until they were destroyed in a fire of 1456.⁶

Could the glass at North Street reflect a concern with literacy and knowledge of the Word of God on the part of the Blackburns? Perhaps even a concern with the literacy of women since it is two women who are portrayed actually holding the books and, of course, two women, albeit holy ones, reading in the main light. We know that the Blackburn family was in contact with the Dominicans. In February 1431–2 Nicholas and Margaret senior set up two Perpetual Chantries – where masses were to be said for the repose of their souls – in the Conventual Church of the Friars Preacher, York – one at the altar of St. Mary Magdalene and the other at the High Altar for the daily celebration of the mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁷ It was also arranged that an Obit or requiem mass was to be celebrated for their souls every year after their deaths. It was to be celebrated in the Conventual Church, sung by the choir wearing their copes, and was to consist of the Offices of the Dead and nine lessons on the Feast of St. James the Apostle (also the feast day of St Christopher), and a Mass of Requiem on the Feast day of St. Anne. Thus we have a connection between the Blackburns, the Dominicans, and even St. Anne.

It is probable that the family's attraction to the Friars was strengthened by a shared interest in the saint. All four orders of Friars took a strong interest in St. Anne, especially as the question of Mary's original sin became an important issue in the fifteenth century. The Dominicans took the position that Mary was conceived in sin but cleansed from original sin in her mother's womb, whilst the Franciscans, Carthusians, and Carmelites declared that she was unblemished from the moment of conception.⁸ Either position increased the importance of the role of St. Anne, whose cult grew correspondingly stronger. Thus, contact between the Blackburn family and any member of the Mendicant Orders could have resulted in an increased awareness of St. Anne on the part of the family. One Friar with whom the Blackburns were in contact on a personal level was Brother Nicholas Watre, a Franciscan, who was Bishop of Dromore in Ireland from 1419 to 1427. Around 1437 he was presented to the rectory of St Mary's, Castlegate in York, which he held until his death in 1453. He was also, with the Blackburns, a member of the prestigious Corpus Christi Guild in the city.⁹ Nicholas Blackburn senior bequeathed Watre five marks in his will, on the condition that Watre celebrated the principal Mass at Blackburn's funeral, while Margaret senior left him 'a covered cup with silver feet called "le Nutt"' – a very personalised gift which indicates that Watre was a good friend of the family.¹⁰

Notwithstanding any influence from the Dominicans, Nicholas senior's devotion to St Anne is evident throughout his life. He made direct mention to her in both his will and its codicil – unusual in such usually formulaic documents. In January 1425 he set up a perpetual chantry in the newly-built chapel of St Anne on Foss bridge in York¹¹ and in 1435 Margaret senior

bequeathed this chantry a green vestment, two painted cloths and two other cloths to hang near the high altar there¹². Whilst not suggesting that it was entirely due to their contact with members of the mendicant orders that the Blackburn family were interested in the devotion to St. Anne, it could be argued that such a devotion would be the not unexpected result of a rich, urban and merchant family being exposed to the powerful affective piety of the day.

It has been argued¹³ that the cult of St Anne appealed to a new urban elite who were attempting a life of piety outside the confines of monasticism. This group saw their own ideals reflected in the saint – an exemplary spouse, mother and widow; hardworking and pious and yet also married. This was increasingly important to the pious layman as society turned away from the ideal of monasticism and many people attempted to live the mixed life of piety in the outside world.

Hence the choice of St Anne in the central light of the Blackburn window was prompted by the family's obvious devotion to her and also sent out a comforting message about the value of pursuing a spiritual life in the secular world – a message their fellow merchant parishioners in this wealthy parish would have been happy to see.

The Blackburn window in North Street also shows a depiction of St Christopher – and again the choice of this saint seems to have been dictated by the particular piety of the family. The Obit that Nicholas and Margaret senior arranged to be said by the Friars Preachers after their deaths included the

Offices for the Dead and nine lessons on the feast day of St James, which is also the feast day of St Christopher. It might also be that a devotion to the saint inspired, or was inspired by, a particular form of charity indulged in by the family throughout their lives – bridge building. St Christopher was the patron saint of travellers and of course was associated with the crossing of rivers through his own actions with the Christ Child.

Nicholas Blackburn senior's will gives us evidence of his concern for the upkeep of certain bridges in Yorkshire. He made it clear to his executors that should Catterick bridge, Kexby bridge, Thornton bridge or Skete bridge fall into disrepair within four years of his death, then repairs should be made in his name.¹⁴ His wife Margaret also left £100 for Kexby bridge and the same for Catterick Bridge in her will proved in 1435.¹⁵

The repair of roads or bridges is not an unusual form of charitable bequest to find in later medieval wills. However, there is evidence that, in this case, such a bequest was a continuation of a longstanding interest in bridge-building. A contract for the building of Catterick bridge survives from 1421¹⁶ – and the name Nicholas Blackburn heads the contracting parties. Blackburn was concerned about the state of the bridges because, at least in the case of Catterick bridge, he had helped pay for it. Catterick bridge was on the main route from York to Richmond – Nicholas' home town – and a closer look at the positions of the other three bridges mentioned in his will show that they too were placed on important routes to and from the city of York. Skete or Shipbridge crosses the River Nid eight miles outside York, while Thornton

bridge crosses the Swale river on the way to Richmond, and Kexby was situated a few miles outside York on the road to the port of Hull. There does not seem to be anything haphazard about Nicholas Blackburn's charity – bridges in good repair on all of these roads would have made life much easier for merchants travelling between his old home town, York and York's main port.

Thus Nicholas Blackburn's motivation in building and keeping in repair stone bridges around York seems to have been a mixture of piety and business sense. It was a charitable good work to build such bridges and his own personal piety was inclined towards such acts. This happily fitted into the need for good highways and bridges that many merchants must have felt. Thus we have acts of charity inspired by a particular personal piety but also informed by his needs as a man of business. Interestingly enough, there was also a chapel on Catterick Bridge¹⁷ which, just like the chapel on Foss Bridge where Nicholas senior founded a chantry, was dedicated to St Anne. Are there grounds for suspecting that Nicholas Blackburn's personal devotion to the saint influenced the dedication of the chapel he had helped to build?

We therefore have some indication that the choice of the figures of St Anne and St Christopher for the Blackburn window were thoughtful ones inspired by the family's particular piety; a piety that informed both their personal religion and their acts of charity. However, it may be that there is yet another reason for the choice of St Christopher for that particular window; one that is not so obvious these days with the glass in the east window of the church. St

Christopher was a particularly popular saint in the Middle Ages since it was thought that sight of him each morning would protect one from sudden death throughout the day. For this reason, a figure of the saint was often placed on the north side of a church, opposite the usual entrance, so as to be seen easily on entering¹⁸. The original positioning of the Blackburn glass was in a north window of the choir¹⁹ – so has an additional message in the choice of the image of St Christopher been lost by the repositioning of the window?

The ‘Blackburn’ window was not the only painted glass that the family donated to All Saints church. Early descriptions of the church show that a two-light window in the north aisle originally contained the figure of a male donor, identified as Nicholas Blackburn, plus the undifferenced Blackburn arms – so either Nicholas senior or Nicholas junior after his father’s death. The glass depicts a wealthy man in a contemporary setting acting out six of the seven Corporal Acts of Mercy prescribed by the medieval church. The act omitted in the window is the seventh, the burial of the dead enjoined by the Book of Tobit. The other six Corporal Acts came from the words of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.²⁰

Here Christ addressed the Blessed after separating them from the Damned at the Day of Judgment. Thus the Corporal Acts of Mercy became associated with the salvation of the soul and were seen as examples to follow in order to secure an afterlife in Heaven rather than Hell. These were material acts of charity which the Later Medieval Church placed great stress upon – and to the medieval mind,

Charity and Piety were almost interchangeable. As has been argued by Thompson,²¹ Piety and Charity in the later medieval period can not be seen as separate virtues. Charity had a direct and immediate spiritual purpose for both the giver and the recipient, and thus charitable acts, such as alms-giving or the setting up of hospitals and Maisons Dieu, had an equally important spiritual dimension. This was especially important for the rich man. Since the doctrine of the Stewardship of Wealth taught that a man's riches had been granted to him by God, and were not his own to use as he liked, charitable acts and alms-giving were supposed to be part of a rich man's role in life. Again, an important message in the painted glass for the wealthy merchant parishioners at All Saints.

Charity was not merely to occur on the deathbed but throughout life. This, it was taught, was why the world was divided into the rich and the poor. The rich might demonstrate their charity by giving alms to the poor, who could demonstrate theirs by prayers for their benefactors. The poor were felt to be blessed – had not Christ sought out and lived with the poor, the sick, and the unclean? By giving alms to such people a rich man could secure salvation. Hence to show Charity, especially to the less fortunate, was an act of piety tied very closely to the salvation of the soul. It might be difficult for the proverbial rich man to get into heaven but, with the guidance of the Church and such precepts as the Seven Corporal Acts of Mercy, he might just be able to achieve his goal.

The Corporal Acts of Mercy were a well-known and popular concept. In addition to representations of the Acts in painted glass, wall paintings, and manuscript illuminations throughout Britain and Western Europe,²² they were also examined

in the religious instruction books now being written for pious laymen such as the Blackburn family. One such book, originating in Yorkshire, was *The Lay Folks Catechism* of Archbishop John Thoresby (1352–73), which provided a list of the Acts of Mercy.

Of whilk the first is to fede tham that er hungry
 That othir, for to gyf tham drynk that er thirsty
 The third, for to clothe tham that er clathelesse
 The ferthe, is to herber tham that er houselesse
 The fifte, for to visite tham that ligges in sekenesse
 The sext, is to help tham that in prison er
 The sevent, to bery dede men that has mister
 Thise er the seven bodily deeds of merci
 The ilk man augh to do that is mighty²³

Pantin²⁴ explains that Thoresby had issued a summary of religious instruction in Latin in 1357, to be expounded in English by parish priests throughout the province of York. He then commanded John Gaytrick, a Benedictine monk at St Mary's Abbey, York, to write an expanded English version in verse. As well as the Seven Works of Mercy, the *Catechism* dealt with the 14 articles of belief, the ten commandments, the seven sacraments, and the seven virtues and seven sins.

The Corporal Acts of Mercy were also mentioned in a book with a special connection for the Blackburn family called the *Bolton Book of Hours*. This book, now kept in the Minster Library, York, was once the property of John and Alice Bolton – the daughter of Nicholas and Margaret senior²⁵. Their names and dates of death appear in freehand in the 'Saints' Kalendar' in the book. Amongst the contents of this Book of Hours is a very intimate Confession, in which the owner of the book confesses to the many evils he or she has done and many good deeds

they have omitted – including not observing the seven sacraments, not holding the Cardinal doctrines of the Church, and not fulfilling the Seven Works of Mercy.²⁶

The division of the world into the sheep and goats on the Day of Judgment might also be witnessed in York every few years in the Mystery Play Cycle. In the Doomsday play, performed by the wealthy Mercers' Guild, Christ explained the salvation of the good by recounting the charitable acts they had performed during their lives:

Whenne I was hungry ye me fedde;
 To slake my thirste youre harte was free;
 Whanne I was clothles ye me cledde;
 Ye wolde no sorowe vpon me see.
 In harde presse whan I was stedde,
 Of my paynes ye hadde pitee;
 Full seke whan I was brought in bedde,
 Kyndely ye come to coumforte me.²⁷

Thus, the Blackburn family would have been well aware of the ideals of the Corporal Acts of Mercy and their duties towards those less fortunate than themselves. The window at All Saints shows the importance they placed on such precepts, which they would have learned both inside and outside the church.

The painted glass windows of medieval York are beautiful and unique pieces of art, but they can also tell us a great deal about the people who donated them and who worshipped under them in their parish churches. Just looking at one family's choice of devotional image can show a long history of devotion to a particular saint or interest in a particular act of charity which informs this choice. Each image in the painted glass meant something to its donors, but would have also had messages for the others who worshipped in the church. In this particular case, the

wealthy merchants of All Saints, North Street, from whose class the Blackburns came, would have learned many things about their place in God's scheme of things and how to achieve a spiritual life and salvation without retreating from the secular world in which they made their living. The images the Blackburn family chose emphasised public spiritedness, not merely a personal devotion to a saint – they show a medieval merchant community not just concerned for its own wealth and salvation but also for the common wealth.

¹ see D. Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery* (Oxford, 1936), 116–17; C. Norton, P. Binski and D. Parks, *Dominican Painting in East Anglia*, (Suffolk, 1987), 51.

² D(omi)ne exaudi or(ati)onem mea(m) aurib(us) p(er)cipe ob(secrationem meam), as given in E. A. Gee, 'The Painted Glass of All Saints, North Street, York', *Archaeologia*, CII (1969), 155.

³ F. Harrison, *The Painted Glass of York*, (1927), 176.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Norton, Binski, Parks, *Dominican Painting*, 53.

⁶ J. H. Moran, *Education and Learning in the City of York* (Borthwick Paper 55, 1979), 26.

⁷ *York Memorandum Book*, III, ed. J. W. Percy, Surtees Society, CLXXXVI (1973), 155. For more on the foundation of chantries in the churches and chapels of the city of York, see Dobson's two papers on the subject, now reprinted in R. B. Dobson, *Church and Society in the Medieval North of England* (1996).

⁸ See T Brandenbarg, 'St. Anne and her Family', in *Saints and She-devils. Images of Women in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, ed L Dresden-Coenders (Nijmegen, 1985, English translation, 1987), 107.

⁹ *The Gild of Corpus Christi, York*, ed. R. H. Skaife, Surtees Society, LVII (1871), 28.

¹⁰ Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, Reg. Test. II, 605 and III, 415.

¹¹ York City Library, R. H. Skaife, *Civic Officials of York* (manuscript), 88–91.

¹² Borthwick Institute, Reg. Test, III, 415.

¹³ For example, Brandenburg, 'St Anne and Her Family' in *Saints and She-devils*, 101–24.

¹⁴ Borthwick Institute, Reg. Test. II, 605.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, III, 415. Also noted in P. H. Cullum and P. J. P. Goldberg, 'Charitable Provision in Late Medieval York: "To the Praise of God and the Use of the Poor"', *Northern History*, XXIX (1993), 24–39.

¹⁶ Noted in *The Archaeological Journal*, VII (1850), 56.

¹⁷ Mentioned in a 1474 contract with the Friars Minor of Richmond given in *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XXII, 1913, 280.

¹⁸ B Coe, *Stained Glass in England, 1150–1550* (1981), 51.

¹⁹ Gee, in *Archaeologia*, CII, 151.

²⁰ Matthew 25:35–6.

²¹ J. A. F. Thompson, 'Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XVI (1965), 178–95.

²²See S. McManaway, 'The Corporal Acts of Mercy Window in All Saints, North Street' (unpub. M.A. dissertation, York Univ. 1981), 19–35 for a detailed account of the representations of the Corporal Acts of Mercy in later medieval art.

²³*Lay Folks Catechism*, eds. T. F. Simmons and H. E. Nolloth, Early English Text Society, Old Series, CCIX (1901), 20.

²⁴W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*, (Toronto, 1980), p. 211–12.

²⁵*The Friends of York Minster, Annual Report*, XVI (1944), 14–17.

²⁶*Ibid*, 17.

²⁷*York Mystery Plays*, ed. L. Toulmin-Smith, (1885, reprint New York 1963), 508.