



An outstanding 20 ft long sculpture of the 14 Stations of the Cross by international sculptor John Blakeley will be dedicated by the Rt Rev Eric Grasar, RC Bishop of Shrewsbury, on Sunday afternoon at the Holy Spirit Church, Leigh Avenue, Marple.

The sculpture entitled the Via Delorosa was commissioned by the parishioners of the Holy Spirit Church as a memorial to their late parish priest, Father James Gaskell.

John Blakeley offered to undertake the work because it would be a piece of sculpture that would always be open to public view. The cost of the work is being financed by an appeal fund which has received hundreds of contributions, small and large, many of them anonymous. The Mayor and Mayoress, Councillor Mrs R. G. Crook, and the Chief Executive of Stockport Metropolitan Borough will attend the ceremony which begins at 2.30pm.

Father Gaskell, who died on July 12th, came to Marple in 1967. Without a church and without an established congregation, he set about his task of creating the Parish of the Holy Spirit.

The Diocese of Shrewsbury had given him a semi-detached bungalow and it was in the lounge of the bungalow that he celebrated his first parish Mass with a congregation of nine parishioners. During the following four years, Father Gaskell held Sunday Mass in premises lent to him by Marple Old Folk's Association in Memorial Park. Eventually a church was built in Leigh Avenue, in 1972.

One thing Father Gaskell had always wanted before he died was to install in his church a portrayal of the Stations of the Cross. After his death, his parishioners decided that, as a memorial to the parish priest they loved and appreciated, they would raise funds in order to fulfill Father Gaskell's wish.

John Blakeley a local sculptor with an international reputation, yearns to do work which can be seen and appreciated by people. "It grieves me to see pieces of sculpture which express my inner soul being taken away to someone's private home for their own private use." And so, when he learnt that the parishioners of Marple wanted to install in the church a set of the Stations of the Cross, John Blakeley asked if he could have what he considered the "privilege" of sculpting a Via Dolorosa for them.

John had visited the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem several times and whilst there had made sketches of each station. "It's odd but many pictures show the Via Delorosa going from right to left with Jesus carrying the Cross to the left. In fact it is the other way." The Jerusalem street through which the Via Dolorosa winds uphill is a narrow cobbled route with arches spanning from one side to the other. The stations are on the left wall as the pilgrim walks uphill.

This kind of attention to detail makes John Blakeley's Stations of the Cross a unique work of art.

In the ninth station, one can see the collapsed pillar which marks the spot where Jesus fell for the third time. In the sixth station, one can count the exact number of bricks in the wall end and can clearly see the imprint of the face of Jesus on Veronica's towel. In the tenth station, where Jesus was stripped of his garments, John Blakeley has reproduced in his sculpture the solitary bush which marks the spot today.

John Blakeley sculptured the 14 stations from a composite slab of white Carrara marble and pink Jerusalem marble. The white Carrara was extracted from the same quarry, north of Rome, used by Michelangelo. The pink Jerusalem, estimated to be 100 million years old was excavated with special permission from the city authorities, from a site 500 yards from the old city. The site is one which Jesus would have walked across as he went to and from the city. By coincidence both the white Carrara and the pink Jerusalem are part of the same mountain range.

John Blakeley, one of the world's five leading sculptors, was born in Salford and spent his childhood in Stockport where he now lives and works. He was educated at the Stockport College of Art and, after service with the Royal Marine Comando, he studied in Italy at the studios of Professor Carlos Nicholi. Mr Blakeley's interest in art was stimulated at the early age of five when he modelled elephants out of clay from the local brickworks and baked them alongside the cakes in the family kitchen. His most recent works have included "The Young Christ in the Temple" carved in pink marble from the Carrara quarry in Italy used by Michelangelo; a bust of the founder of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith, also in Michelangelo marble; a four foot bronze of "Mother and Child" which has been placed in the British Chapel of the former Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck; and the "Soldier and Child" also in bronze which has been commissioned by the East German Government.