

Chloe Hall – Theology and Religious Studies Trip to Rome

Thanks to the generous support of the Patrick Higgins Memorial Scholarship, I was able to go to Rome for a four day period of enrichment in Catholic history and theology and research into the relationship between Ancient Political Rome and 1st Century Judaism.

Inspired by the Preliminary course on the Figure of Jesus Through the Centuries, I visited various Basilicas and analysed the differing depictions of Jesus in the frescoes and altarpiece statues. Most significantly, the Basilica of Saint Peter, the traditional burial site of Saint Peter and the second largest church in global Christendom, holds Michelangelo's *La Pieta* statue of the virgin mother holding the corpse of the crucified Jesus over her lap. In one sense, Michelangelo appears to emphasise the meekness of Jesus through the disproportionately small size of his body in comparison with the enlarged, focal figure of Mary. Conversely, Jesus' face shows no sign of scars from the crown of thorns, nor does his body display gruesome marks of torture, rather this statue expressed to me a subtle sense of the victory of Christ in his mission of humanity. Jesus is not portrayed as merely divinely victorious, but also humanly victorious: the harmonious duality of his nature is what allows him to atone for sins and defeat death. Viewing *La Pieta* within the sizeable grandeur of the Basilica of Saint Peter highlighted this theological thought and emphasised the figure of Mary within the portrayal of Jesus.



Picture taken by me of the Basilica of St.

Similarly dominant depictions of Mary can be found in many of the Basilicas in the Trastevere region; however, one particular portrayal which is less motherly and more regal is of the *Madonna della Clemenza* in the Basilica Santa Maria. This icon of the enthroned virgin and child depicts Mary in the "Maria Regina": extremely unusual in late antiquity Rome. This regal and prominent position of Mary in relation to Jesus in Roman Catholic altarpieces is not, however, depicted in all of the Basilicas in Trastevere. For example, in the Basilica di San Bartolomeo all 'Isola, the figure of Mary is not present above the altar at all, and instead the disciples take the prime position surrounding Jesus, who is elevated on a platform of cloud. This particular fresco draws on the impact of Jesus' teachings, carried forward through the disciples, who are undoubtedly subordinate to Jesus (since they are positioned lower than he is) yet are the key reciprocates of the Gospel message. The various presentations of Mary as a mother, as Maria Regina, or simply not present, demonstrates the versatility of the role of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church and also the inconsistency. Mary embodies different aspects of womanly nature and her meaning within the Roman Catholic Church cannot be surmised by one such fresco depiction: she is maternal, regal and absent as a woman.

Indulging in the surplus Ancient history within Rome, I explored more thoroughly a political religious relationship which has often fascinated me: the clash between 1st Century Judaism and the Roman Empire. Thus, the most potently striking site I visited in Rome was the Arch of Titus. The Arch of Titus, erected in the Roman Forum by Domitian in 81AD, illustrates the Roman defeat of Jerusalem with the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. This arch demonstrates Titus' propaganda of his victorious defeat over the Jewish rebellion in Judea, whereby the Jews are presented as a 'foreign', treasonous religion, and the Roman Religion is advocated with the depiction of Titus as a god. Although this defeat was technically an act of Civil war initiated by Titus against the wealthiest city in the Roman Empire, Jerusalem, this arch presents Judaism as fundamentally *other* from Rome, highlighting this conflict of powers.

Furthermore, to the Christians in 1st Century Rome, this arch would have been of the fulfilled prophetic words of Jesus. In Matthew 24.1-2, Jesus prophesies of Jerusalem, "Truly I say to you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another

Photo of me in front of the Arch of Titus. You can see on the left the menorah being carried.

thrown down.” The Arch of Titus displays the Romans carrying the spoils of the temple, such as the menorah, indicating most clearly to the Christians that the Jews are no longer God’s chosen people, as they have been exiled from the Temple, and Jesus holds the knowledge of God.

Overall, I am very grateful for the opportunity to engage with political Rome and its relationship to 1st Century Judaism, viewing artefacts and exhibits first hand. I am also very glad to have explored and analysed the varying presentations of Jesus and Mary in Roman Catholic Basilicas across Rome and in Vatican City.

