**Readers’ Notes**

*The Merciful Knight by Edward Burne-Jones. 1863.
Watercolour with body colour on paper. Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery.*

This intriguing painting depicts the story of a Merciful Knight by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne Jones. It is based on an 11th-century legend retold by Sir Kenelm Digby in his book *The Broadstone of Honour.* A guide to being an English gentleman, which parallels the 8 Beatitudes with 8 aspects of chivalry.

The book’s hero is a Florentine knight and nobleman called John Gualbert who later was an Italian Abbott and founder of the Vallumbrosian Order. After a vain and egotistic early life, he had a radical conversion which led to his canonisation as a 12th century Italian saint, held in great esteem by several popes.

One [Good Friday](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Friday), John Gualbert was entering [Florence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence) with a small army, when in a narrow lane he met the man who had killed his brother. He was about to kill the man in revenge, when the perpetrator fell upon his knees with arms outstretched in the form of a cross, and begged for mercy in the name of Christ, who had been crucified that day.

John, initially bent on revenge, decided to forgive him because it was the day of Christ’s death. Then he entered the Benedictine Church at San Miniato to pray. As he prayed, the figure on the crucifix bowed its head to him in recognition of his mercy. This profound experience led to John joining the Benedictines, but later he founded his own Order. He became noted for his asceticism, and his compassion to the poor and sick.

San Miniato is a beautiful Mediaeval church but Burne Jones wanted to enhance the intensity of the personal encounter and conversion (between Christ and the knight) by locating it in the stark simplicity of the rustic shrine. In Burne-Jones’ preliminary sketches for *The Merciful Knight*, an example of which we see here - the kiss given by Christ is far more fervent, and Christ is standing over an altar. But in his finished version, the kiss became more protective and deeply caring. The beard of Christ provides a shield over the knight's forehead and over his inexpressibly sad face. And the altar becomes a wooden platform, while still retaining the angels guarding each corner of the roof.

The wounds in Christ's hands draw attention to the vulnerability of the knight's exposed hands – whose armoured gauntlets now hang from his waist. There are other details worth contemplating: the holy water stoup hanging from the door frame, for pilgrims to bless themselves as they approach this simple shrine. And a row of [marigolds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tagetes) in the foreground while wild roses climb along the fence in the middle of the painting. The marigolds came from [Russell Square](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russell_Square), London, close to Burne-Jones' house opposite the [British Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Museum). In Victorian art, marigolds symbolised grief, pain and death so are entirely appropriate in this powerful scene. In the right-hand top corner, we see the enemy riding away on a white horse, he has just been saved from death by this holy knight.

Do you see just how far Christ leans over to hold the knight? The valiant knight protected in his finest armour, contrasts with the defenceless Christ – exposed, wounded and almost naked, offering an unguarded love to this nobleman. But, as befits the code of chivalry, the knight has lain down his helmet and sword before him, in reverence and peace at this holy shrine. In this extraordinary scene, Christ is still wearing a crown of thorns and the nails of the cross still pierce his feet.

In one sense we know that Jesus couldn’t hold this position - since to lean forward would rip even more flesh from his hands and feet. Yet here he is, composed and calm. And very much alive. You can almost feel the knight’s nervousness in this divine embrace, his uniform rattling as he kneels in fear and trembling. No matter how many Mediaeval battles this knight has fought, he’s *never* experienced anything like this before.

This painting is a case study in humility. We watch Christ bestow a blessing on the Knight in a gentle way – it is fraternal and comforting despite his agony. Christ draws the praying knight, physically and spiritually, deeper into the Divine mercy – regardless of the cost to both.

Our focus here is Good Friday, so central to our Christian Calendar. It offers us a unique perspective on mercy and love; modelled first by Jesus and then by a knight who became a humble monk and saint. The sense of humility witnessed by all of us here, is heightened in this ramshackle outdoor shrine.

… he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

**9**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
**10**that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
**11**and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

*Philippians 2:8-11*

Amen.