

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Alternative Reflection for Session 15: The Cross

Offered at Greenbelt 2017, Session 2, Meeting Christ on the Way, a taster for ‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’ on Sunday, 27 August 2017, 12.30 - 1:30pm, in Canvas/The Shelter

Text: Luke 23:26-38

Image: ‘Christ carrying the Cross’, Italian, Venetian, about. 1500, NG6655

A note on the artist and the painting:

This is a relatively new acquisition by the National Gallery, presented in 2015. It’s a small painting, about 500 years old, painted on wood. We don’t know who the artist was. The painting is attributed to Giovanni Bellini’s workshop and is the first Venetian version of this composition known in the UK. It would have been created as a private devotional work, an aid for prayer and contemplation. The composition derives from Bellini, who is celebrated for his pioneering portrayal of natural light. Yet, the artist who painted this one – whilst under Bellini’s influence – has stamped his individuality on a subject much painted by the master and his pupils. (There are around 65 known variants of this composition by Bellini and members of his workshop.) The depiction of Christ’s face, shown with his cross on the way to Calvary, was very popular in Northern Italian painting in the last quarter of the 15th century.

Reflection:

Christ walks on the road to death. Christ is about to lay down his life for his friends. And if we meet him on this road, he will recognise us among his friends. But, in this painting, there’s no crowd pressing around Jesus, as there would’ve been in the hot busy streets of first century Jerusalem. Where are the Roman soldiers driving him along? Where is Simon of Cyrene to relieve his crushing burden? Where are the women of Jerusalem to whom Christ speaks words that comfort the disturbed, and disturb the comfortable?

In his book *Pictures and Tears*, the art historian James Elkins explores why some works of art, sacred and secular, make people cry. The image before us was painted in Venice by an unknown artist at the turn of the sixteenth century. In part, this powerful image of Christ’s face is mimetic. The figure’s sadness stimulates our empathy. This painting of Jesus’ on his way to his death brings us close to a sadness that rises out of contemplating time itself. Christ 2000 years ago – as complex, emotional and vulnerable a human being as you and me – died gruesomely on the cross.

He would die surrounded by a potent mix of those who loved him and those who harmed and murdered him. And yet there is such peace in this particular image of the Passion. The contrast between the beauty and timelessness of the painting and what it is depicting is almost too harsh to bear.

The cross was an instrument of state-sanctioned execution. Jesus had to carry his own cross from inside the city to Golgotha, the rubbish dump outside the walls of Jerusalem. Our artist has composed Christ's cross and the background as a series of simple shapes that intersect and slice through one another. These zones of brown and a not-quite black of dark depth offer a little context, but not much. We are at once privileged and confronted. Because in this striking devotional image, we find ourselves left alone – almost privately – with the suffering Jesus.

Look closely. His white garment is gathered in generous curving folds around his sternum. His chestnut hair, similar in colour to the brutal cross he carries, curls in gentle tendrils around his neck and shoulders. To have painted these strands of lustrous hair would've been technically challenging. One senses it would also have been pleasurable. It was an opportunity for this Renaissance painter to demonstrate his skill. In doing so he draws viewers then and now into the drama of the great story of death, resurrection, and salvation through God's sacrificial love. The painter does this by offering delicate touches of paint that present us with Jesus as a particular man, both ordinary and extraordinary.

The painting delivers a similar effect to that wrought by the seventeenth-century poet Rowland Watkyns. Watkyns wrote a poem about Christ's birth, but with reference to the Passion. The poem blends the tenderness of basic human need with the majesty of the Incarnation in these words:

*He is the Bread of Life, yet hungry lies;
The Living Fountain, yet for drink he cries;
He cannot help or clothe himself at need
Who did the lilies clothe and ravens feed;
He is the Light of Lights, yet now doth shroud
His glory with our nature as a cloud.¹*

Look at Christ's forehead: drops of blood spread unevenly across his lightly furrowed brow, three flecks between his dark eyebrows. Here, in the details of Jesus' face, our Venetian artist offers a theology of suffering. Look how the thorns dig into the pale skin. Look at Christ's mouth: the artist has traced the deep brown brush between Jesus' pink lips offering an ultimately ambiguous expression. There's a slight upward turn in his mouth's left corner. There's a light cupid's bow matched by a barely detectable dip in the tender skin towards the lower lip. Though his eyelids are heavy, with his face shaped by shadows, the mouth of Jesus indicates a complex mixture of emotional possibilities, with resignation at the core.

¹ Watkins, Rowland. 'Upon Christ's Nativity', quoted in Cally Hammond, *Joyful Christianity*, 2009, p. xix.

This is the Jesus of the gospels who knows what he must do, and does not resist. This is the one who bears the torment of torture and humiliation as he walks under the oppressive weight of the cross. This is the Jesus who says to the daughters of Jerusalem, 'do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.' This is the Jesus who asks his onlookers – us included – 'If they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it's dry?' This is the Jesus who prays to the Father that even those driving nails into his hands and feet be forgiven; for they don't understand that they're killing none other than the Son of God.

In our painting, Christ's face is marked by tears. We recall how Jesus cried at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. And we remember that Jesus cries now, in this 400-year-old painting, for the love of his people who accuse, beat, strip, crucify and desert him. Our unknown artist added two tiny touches of pure white, pressing the soft bristles into Christ's freshly painted darkly luminous eyes, bringing them to life. And yet these eyes do not look at us. They don't look at anything. These are reflective eyes that gaze into the core of a costly hope.

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Alternative prayer for Session 15: The Cross

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A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Merciful God, you chose the weak to shame the strong; and you draw all humanity to yourself through the vulnerable love of him who laid down his life for his friends.

Thank you that by the sacrifice of your Son’s crucifixion you lead your people to salvation.

Grant us the grace and the courage to follow Christ today, trusting that through his death we are liberated to walk as your beloved children, stepping towards that day when there will be neither sorrow nor crying.

Amen.