



Lent course

THROUGH ART

Edited by Fr. Sam Perez



The Prodigal Son, Rembrandt (1606-1669)

“The Father

While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him tenderly. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quick, bring out a robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, we are going to have a feast and a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found. They began to celebrate. Now the older son was in the fields; and on his way back he heard music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what was all about. “Your brother has come,” replied the servant, “and your father has killed the calf he had fattened, because he has got him back safe and sound.” He was angry and refused to go in. But his father came out to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I have

slaved for you, and never once disobeyed your orders; yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property, he and his women, you killed the calf we have been fattening. The father said, “my son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours. But it was only right that we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.”

Spend a few minutes looking at Rembrandt’s portrayal of the Father. What strikes you about the figure?

Look particularly at the hands. Is there any difference among them?

What does the picture say about the nature of God?

We suggest that you stop now, and when you are ready, spend a few moments sharing your reflections together...

God does not compare his children with each other. He loves them all, regardless of gifts and achievements.

The Father’s free and generous response to his younger son’s return does not involve any comparison of his older son. To the contrary, he ardently desires to make his older son part of his joy...In all three parables that Jesus puts in response to the question -why he eats with sinners – he puts the emphasis on God’s initiative. God is the shepherd who goes looking for his lost sheep; God is the woman who lights a lamp, sweeps up the house and searches everywhere for the lost coin until she’s found it. God is the father who watches and waits for his children. He runs out to meet them, embraces them, pleads with them, begs and urges them to come home. It might sound strange, but God wants to find me as much as, if not more, I want to find God. Yeah, God needs me as much as I need God. "

The Return of the Prodigal Son, Lent Course, Henri Nouwen

Poem

My mind is a brick and nothing gets through; the porous sponge

of my youth is desiccated into a slab of
stone.

Painting the ashes on such a surface is an
idle act
or leap of faith by the bestower;
for the mind while receiving this mortal dust
of sacrifice
is wandering through the temple maze of
sellers
wondering what to buy, eat in the morrow.
*Well, there'll be no sugar, caffeine, or even meat.
The beans will need soaking, and the fish bought
fresh.*

The sermon is about a recalcitrant camel
made to suckle its mutant offspring,
an oversized albino calf whose onerous
birth
caused the mother's
heart to harden, become indifferent. My
mind is that heart.

The shepherd hire musicians, sing and rub
the poor mother's neck,
and finally, teardrops glisten in that old
naga's eyes
and she is made
to look on her child as if it were her own for
the very first time.
The brick now sodden with tears
will keep in the moisture longer than you
think,
and when through the doors of the church I
slip into the world
the ash will be in me like in the sea.

At the Beginning of Lent: Ash Wednesday
Sally Ito (1964-)

A Century of Poetry for searching the heart, Rowan
Williams, p.141-2



The Last Supper, Stanley Spencer(1891-1959)

“[This] wondrous painting is hanging above a door as if there is nowhere else to place it. But its dynamism tells me that there is no doubt that Christ’s announcement of the betrayal has been made. Although the Last Supper is a famous image in the history of art, we do not always look long enough to see which part of the Last Supper narrative is being enacted. And not all images of the Last Supper actually depict the moment when Christ says that one of his men will betray him. Essentially, the Last Supper marks two aspects – the first, the giving of the communion and the second – the devastating announcement. The moment when Christ says, ‘In truth... I tell you, one of you is going to betray me’. And the disciples look around, up, down, gaze, wonder, agitate – all in disbelief. Some Last Supper images depict both aspects, some just one or the other. But one has to really look.

Leonardo’s version is world famous. In his treatment, he shows the betrayal announcement reaction. Does that make his painting better than other versions because the moment of recognition and reaction is rendered? Could it be that he does it almost too obviously and predictably? Just because the apostles are shown reacting does not mean to say that he treats the narrative in a more realistic fashion. After all, people react to bad or shocking news in different ways. In the gospel of John (13:26) it is asked, ‘Lord who is it?’ And Jesus says ‘It is the man to

whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish’. Here in Spencer’s version, we see Judas, his right hand poised to put in one of the bowls, while his head is sunk into his other hand resting on his face. It must be him, yet can we really know? Sometimes a tell-tale sign is that Judas is without a halo. Here though, none of them have a halo. They are simply dressed in white and all have thick black hair, smoothed down onto the shoulders. And the man next to Judas has a beard. In other versions, Judas is often shown with a beard. Between these two figures is both cast shadow and a charge of light. Spencer adds mystery to the scene which Leonardo doesn’t.

Christ’s mouth is not open as if to speak. The apostles’ faces are barely visible, save for a few on the right. One is looking quizzically, as his right hand is raised to his chin. And here John, though bent into Christ’s body is awake. In other versions, he is often slumped asleep in Christ’s lap. See for example – Ghirlandaio – Last Supper. Although he is on Christ’s body to denote youthful adoration of his Master, in the Spencer he is wakeful. There is nothing somber, sleepy or serene about the image at all.

The force of the announcement is felt physically. The apostles’ legs and feet are stretched out, their garments taught with the stretch. Even post Leonardo and the weighty legacy of that depiction, Spencer brings new energy to this well-known narrative. And to the left, in the brick layered interior, it is as if a gust of wind has blown angels in – but not, it is the Apostles’ white robes lifted, their hands to, one side – almost levitating, they are reacting with their bodies, as they turn slightly inwards. The physicality that Spencer uses to show one moment in Christ’s life is the quintessence of what is seen as his unconventional approach to depicting Christianity. And that physicality is a cry to the apostles to walk out the door and help change the world. As Spencer renders the event, the apostles will be energetic spring-

boards for action. But only when they have recovered from what they have heard.”

<https://theitinerantchurchgoer.wordpress.com/art-stanley-spencer-last-supper-and-cookham-2/>

Poem

Here is the source of every sacrament,
The all-transforming presence of the Lord,
Replenishing our every element
Remaking us in his creative Word.
For here the earth herself gives bread and
wine,
The air delights to bear his Spirit's speech,
The fire dances where the candles shine,
The waters cleanse us with His gentle touch.
And here He shows the full extent of love
To us whose love is always incomplete,
In vain we search the heavens high above,
The God of love is kneeling at our feet.
Though we betray Him, though it is the
night.
He meets us here and loves us into light.
Maundy Thursday by Malcolm Guite (1957-)



Christ of St John of the Cross, Dali (1904-1989)

“*Christ of St John of the Cross* was painted by the Spanish Surrealist painter, Salvador Dalí in 1951 at a time when he was emerging from the strong anti-religious atheism of his youth and was re-embracing the Catholic faith. In my view it contains a lot of religious depth, but space will confine me to offer just a few reflection on how it explores and articulates the redemption.

It is partly inspired by a drawing Dalí was shown by the 16th century Spanish Carmelite mystic, St John of the Cross... He has taken from the Carmelite the daring idea of portraying Christ viewed from above but he has changed much else. Gone is the tortured form of the body, the big nail(s) and the sweat. I would suggest that what we now have is an expression of the theology of the Cross and of Christ as found in the fourth Gospel. In a way, and despite its title, what we have is the ‘Cross of Christ of (that is ‘in’) St John.’ Let me explain.

It has been said that the original 16th century version portrays a crucifix from the angle at which a dying person would view it as it is held up to them to venerate. Dalí has us view

Christ and the cross directly from above and looking down on the array of clouds below and earth below that. It is a heavenly perspective, indeed that of God the Father. Interestingly the Son, Christ, shares the same perspective as the Father: his view follows and continues that of the Father. The fourth gospel stresses that the Son proceeds from the Father and is one with him, seeing and doing whatever the Father directs him to do. In a way the Father also offers the Son to the world, to save it.

The fourth evangelist also stresses that Jesus is the master of his own destiny: he goes to his death because he chooses to. As St Catherine of Siena says he is held to the cross by love and not by nails. This majesty and freedom is brought out well by the lack of nails and the peaceful repose of the figure. John also stresses that the glory of Christ’s victory is already manifest in his actual death. As Jesus had said, ‘when I am raised up from the earth I will draw all people to myself (Jn. 12:32). The glorious and serene Christ, situated above the clouds, speaks of a Christ already raised up, ascended to his Father.

While we can look down on the Christ, in a way our gaze is also drawn upwards to the cross. This is achieved because the painting we look straight into it, sharing its level so to speak. The bottom is very particular. It reminds me of the account of John and James being called while they mend their nets (Mk 1:19-20). In fact, it is set in the contemporary setting of the Spanish fishing village of Port Lligat in which Dalí lived. Jesus dies not just for us in a universal way but for every person in individuality, and not just people back then but here and now. Viewed from here we can look up and, penetrating the clouds with faith, see Christ, at once very clearly physically human but filled with divine glory, immense, embracing everything, and pointing to the Father from whom he has come.

The two perspectives found in the painting meet and produce an overall unity which destroys neither. Christ’s Paschal Mystery unites the divine and human and allows us to be caught up into the divine. The Father offers us his Son. But there is also a challenge.

Do we, like John, want to get caught up in the redemptive work of Christ, a mystery known forever in God, but now made known for our salvation? And will we witness to it?" <https://www.english.op.org/godzdogz/art-of-the-redemption-4-christ-of-st-john-of-the-cross-by-salvador-dali/>

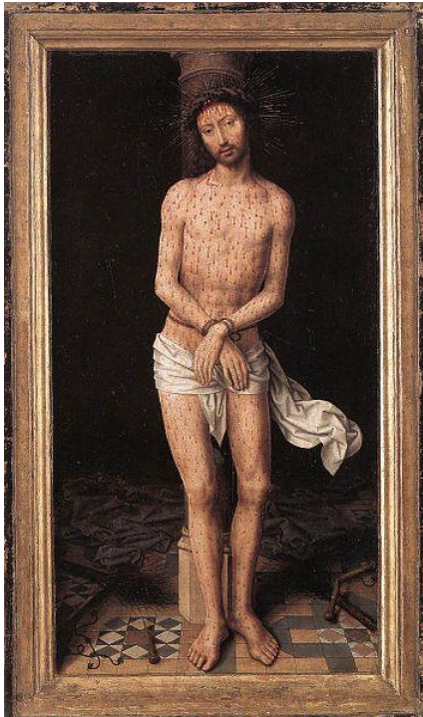
Poem

What is this strange and uncouth thing?
To make me sigh, and seek, and faint, and die,
Until I had some place, where I might sing,
And serve thee; and not only I,
But all my wealth, and family might combine
To set thy honour up, as our design.
And then when after much delay,
Much wrestling, many a combate, this dear end,
So much desired, is giv'n, to take away
My power to serve thee; to unbend
All my abilities, my designs confound,
And lay my threat'nings bleeding on the ground.
One ague dwelleth in my bones,
Another in my soul (the memory
What I would do for thee, if once my groans
Could be allowed for harmony):
I am in all a weak disabled thing,
Save in the sight thereof, where strength doth sting.
Besides, things sort not to my will,
Ev'n when my will doth study thy renown:
Thou turnest th' edge of all things on me still,
Taking me up to throw me down:
So that, ev'n when my hopes seem to be sped,
I am to grief alive, to them as dead.
To have my aim, and yet to be
Farther from it than when I bent my bow;
To make my hopes my torture, and the fee
Of all my woes another woe,
Is in the midst of delicates to need,
And ev'n in Paradise to be a weed.
Ah my dear Father, ease my smart!
These contrarieties crush me: these cross

actions

Do wind a rope about, and cut my heart:
And yet since these thy contradictions
Are properly a cross felt by thy Son,
With but four words, my words, Thy will be done .

The Cross, George Herbert (1593-1633)



Christ at column, Hans Memling (1430-1494)

“This painting, which measures 50.5cms x 26.7 cms (approx.. 20” x 10.5”), was obviously created not for a public space such as a church, but for a domestic setting. Its purpose was to enable the viewer to concentrate his or her mind on the suffering and the wounds of Christ.

The cult of the Wounds of Christ was a fourteenth-century development in spirituality, in which mathematics played an important role. It was calculated that Christ’s body received 5,475 wounds, based on the computation that if a worshipper said 15 Aves and Pater Nosters each day for a whole year, that would equal the full number of wounds Christ endured (David S. Areford, “The Passion Measured”).

While it is clear that in this Memling image there are not 5,475 wounds, each drop of blood has been painted with immense and almost patterned care. On the floor to the right-hand side of Christ is a scourge placed in the shape of a cross, the broken handle of a whip and a bunch of lacerating twigs. Christ himself, wearing a radiate crown of thorns, is tied to the column. He is entirely alone, the torturers have left him, for the moment, in

the torture chamber; his disciples have scattered. Yet the Christ-figure maintains a serene demeanour, in spite of the suffering already inflicted and in spite of his knowledge of the greater agonies of the crucifixion, which is yet to come.

Memling asks us, as it were, to keep our eyes on this figure and through our prayers draw near to God’s redemptive love for us.”

Rt. Rvd. Christopher Herbert,
Seeing & Believing, p.12

Poem

A dream the old song has it, just
a dream. I was driving the old beige
Camry going round and around
and around searching for the Jeep
I was sure I’d parked or would have parked
near the decaying wharfs down by the sea
the day before but unable now
to find it though I kept circling back
and forth and back alley after alley
without any luck then finally thought
to press the panic button on my key
fob and yes I thought I could just
make out the beep beep sound
so that I had to believe my car
was waiting out there somewhere
as now fog and night descended.
It was then I remember seeing two
middle-aged women witting in an old
van one at the foot the other at the head
so I rolled down my window to ask
if they could hear the beep beep
and if they could would they please
please be good enough to tell me
where the signal was coming from
because as I explained my hearing
wasn’t very good now and I couldn’t tell
if I was even headed in the right direction.
They were friendly enough and both
smiled back at me and asked if it was
a pizza truck or an ambulance
I was looking for or if the thing
was red or white the whole time
these pleasant smiles fitted to their faces
until it dawned on me that I would have to
keep on searching by myself though by now
everything was dark and the signal I was sure
I’d heard I think kept growing dimmer
though it had to be out there oh God
it had to be out there somewhere
still waiting for me to find it.

Holy Saturday, Paul Mariani
(1940 –)



“In choosing this moment, before Jesus wakes and calms the sea, Rembrandt, with broad, thick brushwork moves us into the scene. We too can feel the wind, the fear, and the uncertainty as these seasoned sailors fight for their lives. We can feel their dread as the next wave breaks, and capsizing seems inevitable. It is important to feel the disciples palpable fear, so that we can fully appreciate their terror after the storm is stilled, as they look at Jesus and wonder, “Who is this man?”...

The chaotic sea often represents evil which needs to be re-ordered, or re-created. The sea can be seen to represent the world that Rembrandt lived in, chaotic and frightening. As the storm rages, the viewer knows that soon Jesus will speak, and calm will be restored. Jesus will bring order back to the creation.

As always though, Rembrandt is calling us to look deeper. To see how these physical struggles relate to the spiritual, internal lives of the men on this boat. You might have noticed that the mast of the ship forms a cross diagonally against the stormy sky. At this point in the gospel narrative the disciples believe they have found a new rabbi, in moments they will witness the stilling of the

sea and realize that Jesus is more than a rabbi,

he can command the winds and the sea. Therefore, this story is considered a major transitional moment, the disciples begin to understand that Jesus’ mission is more than they imagined. While they could not foresee the cross in Jesus future, the viewers of this painting would be familiar with the symbol.”

Kelly Bagdanov,
<https://www.kellybagdanov.com/2022/08/12/rembrandts-storm-on-the-sea-of-galilee/>

“Before any human being touches us, God forms us in secret; he textures us from the depth of the earth and before any human being decides about us, God knits us together in our mothers’ womb. God loves us before any person can show love to us. He loves us with a first love; an unlimited, unconditional love; wants us to be his beloved children and tells us to become as loving as himself.”

The Return of the Prodigal Son, Lent Course, Henri Nouwen

Poem

2. And Jesus was a sailor
 When he walked upon the water
 And he spent a long time watching
 From his lonely wooden tower
 And when he knew for certain
 Only drowning men could see him
 He said “All men will be sailors then
 Until the sea shall free them”
 But he himself was broken
 Long before the sky would open
 Forsaken, almost human
 He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone

[chorus]

And you want to travel with him
 And you want to travel blind
 And you think maybe you’ll trust him
 For he’s touched your perfect body with his mind

Suzanne (1967), Leonard Cohen