



Easter Scenes

Giovanni Bellini (c.1430–1516), *The Blood of the Redeemer* (c.1460–5)
National Gallery, London

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Exodus 24: 1–11 *Hebrews 9: 1–15, 24–26*

‘God’s majesty is sullied by an unfitting and absurd fiction, when He, who is incorporeal, is made to resemble corporeal matter, when He who is invisible is made to resemble a visible image [...]’ (John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.11.2)

How chastening to be reminded of this when preaching in a series of sermons to which ‘visible images’ are central, but on the particular Sunday in that series which most deliberately evokes the majesty of the invisible God. By choosing Trinity Sunday, of all Sundays, to talk about a painting I have – haven’t I? – made a rod for my own back.

Not that Western Christian art isn’t liberally littered with experiments in visually depicting the Trinity. The composition of a type of image called the ‘Throne of Grace’, for example, emerged in the thirteenth century and began to ‘dominate trinitarian visualisation and conceptuality in the West [...] from about 1400 CE onwards.’¹ In such images God the Father holds ‘in his arms the cross on which Jesus hangs, displaying him to the onlooker.’² Often, although not always, a dove hangs between them, symbolising the Holy Spirit.³ But such images of ‘two blokes and a bird’, however expertly or beautifully executed by artists, fall squarely – and fairly – under Calvin’s condemnation of ‘unfitting and absurd fictions’. Better to have a more minimalist and diagrammatic teaching tool like the so-called ‘Trinity Shield’ (or *scutum fidei*), which is a visual guide to the *doctrine* of the Trinity and its theological grammar, rather than something that could be mistaken for a picture of the Trinity itself.

A key part of the problem is the tendency of such artworks to betray the coinherent relatedness, the mutual indwelling, of the persons of the Trinity by showing them as discrete entities. Perhaps even more problematic is their anthropomorphising of God the Father. There are plentiful, fairly basic, theological arguments against this. They risk an idolatrous reduction of the Godhead to something like us, something made by human hands, and now under the command of our gaze. When you look at these big, bearded, grey-haired men,

¹ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 209–210.

² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 190.

³ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, p. 212.

you are – as one American scholar has put it – looking at the God atheists don't believe in.⁴ And if *that* is the God Christians worship, then the atheists are dead right to be scornful. Calvin's stricture is the best defence against such reductionist temptations: to 'make the incorporeal resemble corporeal matter' is indeed a dangerous absurdity. For 'no one has ever seen God', as the first Letter of John puts it (1 John 4: 12).

But hang on a minute. Haven't we just heard, in our Old Testament reading, of how Moses, Aaron and his two sons, and seventy of the princes of Israel, went up Mount Sinai and did just this?:

Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink (Exodus 24: 9–11).

You can be sure that that has caused some head-scratching and argumentational contortions from both rabbis and Christian exegetes alike. Even the passage itself acknowledges the shock value of what it is saying. In the Old Testament, normally, the attempt to look at God is predicted to be lethal. Exodus feels the need to signal that it knows this by highlighting that this occasion is an anomaly. 'Upon the nobles of Israel he laid not his hand.' As they feast on food and drink to celebrate the ratification of God's great covenant with Israel – a momentous event, solemnized by the sprinkling of blood on the people – they also get to feast their eyes on God's glory, and that pavement of sapphire stone.

What did they see, exactly? Some have said it was a mystical vision rather than a literal seeing. Well, maybe; but the eating and drinking that is going on at the same time seems very real indeed, and I for one find it hard to imagine the feasibility of entering a visionary state while literally filling your face. Some have said that the mountaineers saw only a part of God (his feet, perhaps, given that the pavement is such a focus of interest in the passage). Some – in a Christian tradition – that they were vouchsafed a prefiguration of Jesus, God incarnate.

Exodus is not inclined to solve this one. What I think is clear is that the sealing of the covenant, and the sprinkling of the blood, is the prelude to a very special intimacy with God in which ocular experience plays a full part. So we might be better off thinking not so much about *what* was seen when the chosen few saw God, but *how* it was seen.

Here, purity is the key. The sprinkled blood of the covenant makes the people pure. The gathered company on the mountain are purified, and in this state of purity they commune with God. 'Blessed are the pure in heart', as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes, 'for they shall see God'. The same principle is at work in this New Testament passage as in Exodus; here too purity is a state of blessedness, and here too seeing is the promised reward.

This purity is offered now to us as well, in the wake of Christ. 'For', as our second reading tonight puts it, 'if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?' (Hebrews 9: 13–14)

A new and greater purity is here, for the work of the High Priests of the first covenant (after Moses's example) is now consummated in the work of the High Priest who is Christ himself. And the blood of animals that was formerly sprinkled *by* Moses to sanctify and purify the Israelites is now sprinkled *from* Christ himself. This unsurpassable and unrepeatable

⁴ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=668&v=JdaBe0dFsTl (accessed 18/7/19).

sprinkling ensures something extraordinary: a 'new testament', established 'by means of [Christ's] death', by which those who are called may 'receive the promise of eternal inheritance'. Christ has put away sin, once for all, by the sacrifice of himself.

It's often said that the doctrine of the Trinity isn't present in Scripture, but this passage in Hebrews is, let it be noted, profoundly trinitarian: 'Christ through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God' (v.14).

And just as profoundly trinitarian, so I want to argue, is tonight's painting: Giovanni Bellini's *The Blood of the Redeemer*. It is so much better a picture of the Trinity for showing us only Christ. Christ, after all, is acclaimed in Scripture to be 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1: 15). We are not to seek another one, as Calvin would be the first to say, and as all those theologically disappointing (if artistically inventive) Thrones of Grace should convince us.

It is a very unusual image that has echoes of the famous pictorial tradition showing the suffering Christ which is known as the Man of Sorrows (or *imago pietatis*). But here, this Man of Sorrows is not a passive figure. He is upright, squeezing blood from the wound in his side, to be caught by an angel in a chalice.

He may initially strike the contemporary viewer as, if you'll forgive the phrase, a sort of 'Zombie Jesus' – post-crucifixion and not yet resurrected, but nevertheless somehow active. But (on a less macabre note) although we see the marks of the passion around him, in the crown of thorns, in the cross itself and the wounds in his hands and side, his activity gives a positive sense that this is a suffering freely undertaken for our redemption, hence the title of the painting. This is our Redeemer.

It's a painting that also encourages us to reflect on the way that Christ has bound himself to this earth of ours. The paved floor of the space in which he stands is made up of white and green tiles. The paleness of the white tiles evoke the whiteness of the pallor of Christ's body and the green of the green tiles suggests a link with the world beyond the barrier, the world in which we live, our world, which is in need of the redemption that Christ offers.

We have encountered pavements once already this evening: the sapphire pavement that suggested a heavenly sanctuary where the blood-sprinkled elect could eat and drink with God. Look closely at the pavement in this painting. Where is our encounter with Christ taking place? What sort of space is it? Where would we expect to see tiles like that?

I think the marble floor here is very reminiscent of a sanctuary space, placed immediately around an altar in a church, marked off from the rest of the church by the altar rail where the faithful will come to receive communion. And indeed there is the suggestion of an altar rail here too in the form of a stone parapet – although curiously it shows us images from the pagan world: classical rites and rituals.

Meanwhile the clouds Bellini has painted around Christ, which once contained the forms of cherubs, reinforce the sense that this a rather special kind of sanctuary. It may not be the sapphire colour of heaven, and it may share some of the recognisable architecture of a church 'made with hands', but might this nevertheless be a heavenly sanctuary?⁵ The unearthliness of it is further accentuated by the fact that while objects and figures in the landscape beyond the rail cast shadows in a normal way, Christ and the angel cast no shadow at all...

⁵ A point beautifully explored by Robin Griffith-Jones here: <https://thevcs.org/sanctuary-not-made-hands/seeing-what-god-sees> (accessed 18/7/19).

If this *is* a sanctuary, however (whether earthly or heavenly), we are looking at it from the wrong way round. It's a sanctuary viewed in reverse as though we're looking back down the church towards the nave where the congregation gathers. Although where the nave would normally be, there's instead the outside world. But maybe that's appropriate, because the whole world has – from one point of view – been invited to gather at this sanctuary place, to receive the benefits of this redemption.

And if it is the case that we are standing in the position of the altar, then in other words we are standing in the position of God the Father, who symbolically (at the altar) receives the offering which is Christ's sacrifice, and the praise and thanksgiving of the redeemed. And if that's right, then that's a very extraordinary and unsettling possibility and yet also a very subtle and brilliant one on Bellini's part. For what Bellini has done is to *indicate* the presence of God the Father *indirectly*, not by crudely trying to show him to us, but by giving us a sense of his presence in this painting as the one who looks upon the world through the sacrifice of Christ. He has invited us to look not *at* but *with* God, and thereby learn something of God in a different and more oblique – but maybe much more appropriate – way.

Well, that would be to show how two persons of the Trinity are present in this painting in two very different ways. Now what of the Holy Spirit?

Like the Father, the Spirit is not a visible object. Admittedly, there is in the Gospels the statement that the Spirit descended 'like a dove' at Christ's baptism, but they do not make it clear exactly who saw this descent; it may only have been Jesus himself. The Spirit is *properly* known, so Christian theology teaches, by his *effects*, which are the transformation of human creatures towards holiness in the company of one another, and the transformation of the whole creation towards its perfect and final – its eschatological – fulfilment.

In Bellini's picture, as I have suggested, the whole world has become the church's nave. And, out in this worldly space, 'transformation' is *exactly* what we see. Thus – again indirectly, as with the suggestion of the Father's presence – this painting may also be helping us to 'see' the Spirit.

Look closely. There is a road in the distance which threads its way from one side of a typologically-rendered landscape to the other. As in many paintings designed to explore the redemption achieved by Christ's sacrifice, the transition from an old dispensation to a new one is displayed in the contrast between the inhospitable and rocky terrain on Christ's left, with its dead tree and ruined architecture, and the welcoming verdancy of the lower-lying land on Christ's right, where well-maintained buildings suggest flourishing human community. The two figures on this road (who look like a Dominican friar and his acolyte) are moving along this road. It is not a direct one. Rather, it folds back on itself in two implied bends, in order to bring the pilgrim travellers right past the entrance to the space in which Christ makes a cup of redemptive eucharistic blood ready for them. After that, it will fold back on itself once more, in two further bends, so as to deliver them to their destination.

Bellini's travellers are being transformed, like the very landscape they traverse. They are an invitation to us to see the Spirit at work in shaping them as recipients of Christ's redemption: to enter 'the sun-drenched landscape of eternal salvation'.⁶

⁶ Beverly Louise Brown, 'As Time Goes By: Temporal Plurality and the Antique in Andrea Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* and Giovanni Bellini's *Blood of the Redeemer*', in *Artibus et Historiae* 67 (XXXIV), 2013, pp. 21–48.

As I've suggested, the world in this painting is where the nave of the church should be; the whole wide world *is*, potentially, the congregation. By looking upon this world (our world) through the sacrifice of Christ, God the Father loves and longs for it. By the work of the Holy Spirit, he seeks to heal it and draw it to himself; to draw it to this altar rail.

If the world comes, what will it receive? The blood that Christ squeezes from his side falls into a chalice held by an angel, who is almost like a server at Christ's eucharist. The gathered world will be gathered in Christ, who gives his very self to be shared, and who points beyond death to a new hope, for the whole of creation. If the left-hand scene of pagan ritual seems to be a scene of ritual mourning, a scene associated with death, then Christ's open and outstretched arm displaying its wounds offers even to this pagan world a hope that there's a life beyond that, a way opened up through his unique death to a redeemed and hopeful future. Those who participate in him will die with him but will also rise with him. In this way, his cross is itself a dawn: the dawn of a new hope, a new beginning for the world.

'For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God' (Hebrews 9: 24). And he has done so *'for us.'*