



Easter Scenes

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Seven Works of Mercy* (1607),
Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples

Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Supper at Emmaus* (c.1601),
National Gallery, London

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Deuteronomy 8: 1–3 *Luke 24: 13–35*

Where is this scene taking place? Where is this crowded street?

Well, the word 'street' is bit too grand, and the word 'crowded' is not quite right either. This is not so much a street, as a mere alley way, in the rather dingy space where a narrow passage turns between two tall buildings. It is gloomy, dark, grimy, altogether uninviting. It is night time – but this looks like the sort of deep and dank lane which is never penetrated by sunlight, even on the brightest day. It's the sort of place where, if you had taken a wrong turn and fetched up here by accident, you would double check that your wallet and mobile were firmly tucked away. And the word 'crowded' doesn't quite do it either – this place is overcrowded, it is teeming with a mass of humanity, almost falling over each other. There is hardly room to breathe, as we say – and to be honest, and not to put too fine a point on it, if you did find yourself in this congested, gloomy well of darkness, you'd be well advised not to breathe, or at any rate, not to breathe too deeply, at least until you are well past the jail on the corner, and the dead body heading feet first into the centre of the scene.

Where can this be? Well, when Caravaggio painted this picture he was in Naples – the city to which he had fled after he had killed an acquaintance in a back street brawl in Rome. They had argued about – well, there are different accounts, but to be honest, with Caravaggio, they could have argued about money, about a woman, about a boy, about a game of cards, about whose turn it was to buy a round, or just about anything, since Caravaggio seems to have had a gift for finding trouble – a difference of opinion would lead to a disagreement, a disagreement would lead to an argument, and argument would lead to a brawl or a fight or a wounding, and this would lead him to a night, or more than a night, in jail, and to questioning before a magistrate. In any case, after the fight that necessitated his leaving Rome, the fugitive Caravaggio had fetched up in Naples in 1606, then the largest city in Europe after Paris and three times bigger than Rome – a noisy, densely populated place, with paupers and beggars on every street corner, and with its own early versions of high rise tenement buildings and no shortage of sunless, dangerous and winding alleyways.

So the setting for the picture – this claustrophobic corner – well, it could be the view from the window of his lodgings, for all we know. But it could, just as well, and in another sense, be anywhere – for our world has plenty of such places, places where the poor throng, packed close together and sometimes stacked high, drawn to towns and cities where they hope, vainly more often than not, to share in the good things which we can guess are to be found a little way away, but on the other side of the town, where the streets really are streets and where there really is room to breathe.

There are plenty of places where the poor lived cheek by jowl hoping against hope for their daily bread. So the scene is set it could be in Naples, but in any other such city or town. But however it may be that the stage or set is commonplace, what goes on this set is far from commonplace, far from being an everyday scene, whether in Naples or elsewhere. For if we chanced upon this street corner, we may not wish to breathe too deeply, but we wouldn't need to hold onto our wallets or our mobile phones, for under the watchful eyes of the Christ child and his mother, we see not the mugging and theft and violence which we might fear in such dark streets – especially if Caravaggio and his mates were about – but not just one, not just two, not just three, but all seven of the so-called seven works of mercy.

In his very final teaching before his crucifixion, as reported in Matthew's Gospel, Christ mentions six works which the Son of Man will recognise when he judges between the sheep and the goats. 'Come you blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' All well and good, but six isn't as hallowed a number as seven, so the early church added burying the dead to Christ's list – hence, seven works of mercy.

Now there was a fraternity in Naples devoted to relieving the plight of the poor. They had, shortly before Caravaggio arrived, built a new church. For its altar they commissioned this picture to depict the works to which they were committed. And here we see them all. In the centre of the picture, a body is carried feet first to burial by a singing clerk and his assistant. There's the first work of mercy. To the right, a young woman somewhat anxiously feeds her father in prison – it was a well-known classical tale – thereby performing two works of mercy in one go. That's three done. In the middle, on the left hand side, that richly dressed and slightly melancholy young man, in the guise of St Martin, is giving his cloak to the barely clothed man on the ground, whose stricken posture is a sign of sickness. So that's clothing the naked and caring for the sick – and we have five under our belt. Behind St Martin a solemn pilgrim (a stranger, with the face of Christ) is welcomed by an inn keeper who points him to his lodgings – that makes six. And then, very last, right in the background, giving us a complete set – we have the thirsty Samson drinking from a jaw bone, perhaps supplied by the same innkeeper. Seven works of mercy all packed into this dark and gloomy space.

It is an astonishing bit of painting. This is a large canvas. 4 metres by 2.5, as big as the picture over the altar, and painted in a space of not much more than seven weeks, with all the brilliance and bravado which Caravaggio seemed to have at his fingertips. 'For a dark and desperately overcrowded town, he [Caravaggio] created dark and desperately overcrowded altarpiece.'¹ And created from his imagination – for whether or not he could see the setting of the picture from his lodgings, I doubt that he ever saw the seven works of mercy performed all at once. The streets which were Caravaggio's home more readily supplied material for the gambling, pimping, anger and violence which his pictures often depict. But for this visual orgy of good deeds he has gone not to the streets on which he was so much at home,

¹ A. Graham-Dixon, *Caravaggio* (London, 2010), 243.

but to the bible, to classical legend, to the tales of the saints, and blending them together, has given us a vision of a land where the brutality of street life is transfigured by deeds of mercy – where the flash of a sword puts clothes on a man's back, and is not just the beginning of another violent quarrel.

So where is this? It is Naples, it is everywhere (since the poor are always with us), and it is nowhere. It is somewhere over the rainbow, if you like, where, in a place of darkness, we see only the deeds of light. But where, oh where, is that?

In our second picture, Caravaggio takes us back to another place of darkness, Emmaus, which we heard about in our second lesson, and one of the Easter scenes which we have been looking at this term. We have a typical Caravaggio scene – he has set the meal in a rough and ready inn, with two rough and ready disciples, and a rough innkeeper, and in the middle Christ blessing the bread before them – all very starkly lit.

The disciples have reached Emmaus from Jerusalem – we are not told why they are making this journey - on the afternoon of the very first Easter day, the day on which – though they don't believe it yet - Christ rose from the dead. As they are walking along, deep in conversation about the goings on of the last few days, they are joined by a stranger, who joins in their conversation, explaining and expounding the scriptures relating to the Messiah. As they reach Emmaus this stranger makes to go on. But the hour is late and the disciples press him to stay – and when he breaks bread with them, the stranger is made known to them as Christ, at which point he disappears from view and the disciples head back to Jerusalem to tell their companions.

And that's the very point – the disciples head back to Jerusalem – that's the vital point of the story which we miss if we overlook a detail which it is indeed easy to overlook. As they reach Emmaus earlier in the day, the two disciples press the stranger, who makes to go on, not to do so – 'stay with us,' they say, 'because it is nearly evening and the day is now nearly over.' You don't walk the roads round Jerusalem in the evening when the night is coming on – nor in Rome and Naples for that matter – and out of simple human concern for the stranger they bid him stay the night. But after Christ has made himself known to them we read: 'at that very hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem'. So – here's the point – the same two disciples who a little while before had just warned a mere stranger against the dangers of his journey, are now, heedless of dangers to themselves, intent on travelling back to Jerusalem to tell the good news to the others back in the city. They are prepared to walk a perilous seven miles even in the gathering darkness.

Caravaggio has depicted the very moment when the disciples' eyes are opened and has directed us to the transformation it effects. The uncomprehending innkeeper stands blankly to one side and is unmoved. The two disciples are, however, not unmoved – indeed they are, literally, moving as we look at them. The one is gripping his chair as if he might rise from it. The other one is stretching out his arms wide in amazement. They are moved – indeed they are moving, and their movement will carry them all the way back to Jerusalem late that night. And as their getting up from the table tells of their immediate future – they will depart into the darkness to bear witness to the light – it also surely predicts more distant futures. Look at that disciple with his arms outstretched in amazement, but also as if on a cross. For the darkness and danger they will face is not just the darkness of this single night. Or rather – the darkness of this particular night represents the wider darkness which they must confront as apostles, as those who will bear witness to the light. Their standing up here in the inn, foretells the future in which they will have to stand up for the Lord in a different sense. It foretells a time when they will stretch out their arms not just in surprise, but perhaps in the pain of martyrdom.

I asked where the other picture was set. But what about this one? Where is this scene? Well it is Emmaus, obviously. It's in the title. And where is Emmaus? If that were a Tripod question, you'd better give the dull, but correct answer that the site is disputed – that, as far as I recall, though I haven't checked it, at least two places in the Holy Land claim to be the scene of this post-resurrection appearance, the difficulty being that, apart from the fact that Emmaus is 7 miles from Jerusalem, there isn't much to go on.

But that's the dull exam answer. The real answer is that the Emmaus Caravaggio depicts is, like that street corner, everywhere. Or rather – it is wherever Christ presents himself, wherever Christ is represented, re-presented, and where the faithless, having a Sunday afternoon stroll in the country, become disciples willing to bear witness to the light, to defy the darkness. And wherever that happens, wherever such disciples are made, even the mean streets of Naples could become a place where you might just witness works of mercy.

You have to say 'might'. In Caravaggio's pictures, light is nearly always a bit moody and somewhat mysterious. It is often very bright, but the shadows are deep, very deep indeed, and you can't help but feel that the two, light and darkness, are in contention, and that there is always a risk that the darkness might just win out. But that's how it is – in that alleyway in Naples, and in all the dark places of the world. Light doesn't have it all its own way, as Caravaggio, a man of the alleyways who would die as a result of wounds sustained in a brawl in a rough tavern before his fortieth birthday, knew only too well.

Those who perform the works of mercy in Caravaggio's great picture, seem to go about their work somewhat solemnly, almost anxiously, and perhaps with a certain air of sadness and melancholy – as well they might, for they know how deep are the woes of the poor, their hunger, thirst, sickness, imprisonment, their lack of shelter and clothing, even sometimes their lack of the wherewithal to bury their dead. Caravaggio put his assorted cast of saints, and biblical and classical figures to work with a weary sense of the boundless need and necessity which their efforts address. And we ask, as he may well have asked, how or where this imagined world, the one he has summoned up, might become real? His answer is there in that picture of the supper at Emmaus – it becomes real where Christ is present, and re-presented to us, represented to us, and being present transforms and redirects our lives. My prayer for you as you leave this place, is that in our lives as they remain to us, the works of mercy may be multiplied among us, that we, sinners one and all, may represent Christ to one and another, as the great Caravaggio represented him to us.