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Picturing the Christian Life

Vittorio Carpaccio: Meditation on the Dead Christ

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There is no liturgy for Holy Saturday - the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. In the Anglican tradition, no weddings are held, and no liturgical colours are specified. What does this mean? It means, among other things, that you have never heard a sermon on Holy Saturday.

It's a day in between.

Action emphatically downwards on Friday.

And action emphatically upwards on Sunday.

On Saturday, things rest.

Between Friday's darkness, and Sunday's light.

Between Friday's death, and Sunday's life.

Between Friday's despair and Sunday's assurance.

There is (almost) no Saturday in scripture. Between Matthew 27 and 28:
nothing.

Between Mark 15 and Mark 16; Between John 19 and 20: nothing. Only in Luke, at the end of chapter 23, there is one sentence: "On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment."

What can we see in this picture?

Top left: a bent cross on a hill, with a cross on either side. Dark clouds in the sky. A winding path that leads the viewer's eye to the darker bottom left.

Middle left: two men taking a slab away from a tomb. A third elderly well-dressed man carrying something (a liquid?) in a container towards the tomb.

Bottom left: the scene moves forward towards the viewer: open graves, bones strewn, a slab with a pallid figure, lying on a shroud, gash in his side, skulls underneath.

Top middle: some kind of dwelling on top of a cliff, an arch underneath; trees (some with leaves, some bare); two musicians far in the distance (one seated playing a stringed instrument; one standing blowing something, leaning against a split tree); below that broken structures; broken slabs; columns, statues; a monkey running

Middle middle: an old gaunt man leaning against a tree - very prominent

Bottom middle: more of the pallid figure on the slab; a pierced foot

Top right: tree with branch that aims for the far top right; lighter clouds in the sky; mountains in the background; a figure on horseback; other figures lying down

Middle right: two women - a younger supporting the older; in front of them a man in a red garment with his back to the viewer

Bottom right: green foliage; two plants in bloom, that bends towards the seated women

There is movement on the left with the men at the tomb, and movement of a sort by the musicians. This contrasts with the stillness of the seated man, the women and the man in red.

Lots of contrasts of light and dark.

This is Meditation on the Dead Christ by Vittorio Carpaccio, a Venetian artist, from 1505, which currently hangs in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin.

It is a highly communicative picture, which draws on many conventions which would have been familiar to his contemporaries.

The well-dressed old man carrying the liquid? We should read John 29:39:

“Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds”. It’s Nicodemus.

The women are clearly identified as Mary the mother of Jesus, her head stretched back, in shadow; supported by Mary Magdalene, whose head is in the light, dressed in beautiful red, her cheek against the other Mary.

John the Evangelist is traditionally painted wearing red - so we know this is he - although here he is presented in a most unusual pose, holding his head in his hands.

John's head is well known in John's (his own) Gospel: he is the one who reclines next to Jesus at the last supper, and he is often portrayed as leaning his head on Jesus' breast. Here he holds his own head - it is not just a mourning pose, but perhaps a more emphatic lack of a breast to lean on.

The gaunt man sitting against the tree is traditionally Job. He is the patient one who says, 'I know that my redeemer liveth'. He is traditionally painted waiting next to the dead body of Christ. And the dead man lying on a shroud is clearly Christ himself.

This picture is sort of on Friday - the activity of Nicodemus, Christ not yet in the tomb.

And is sort of on Saturday: Job waiting - leading us in waiting - for the resurrection; the two Marys and John far from the cross; the other disciples - if that is them - scattered across the landscape.

It seems as if it's Friday on the left hand side, and Saturday- the Sabbath rest - on the right hand side. I am unsure how this works, but in the painting it makes sense.

Jesus' body is generally in someone's hands on Friday, before it is laid in the tomb.

And here it is by itself, untouched, and perhaps reminding you, as it does me,

awkwardly of Sleeping Beauty's sleep of a hundred years after being pricked on the spindle; or of Snow White, unrevivable, in her glass coffin, between death and life, after eating the poisoned apple. Like their sleep, this is an unnatural scene. Unlike their sleep, this really is death, as death always is for Christians. Yet it is a strangely magical world, of desert colours in the foreground, and green in the far distance; of trees that are dead and trees that are alive; of dark clouds and light clouds. It is an unstable world.

The thing that stands out for me visually is the extraordinary tree on which Job leans. One hand is on a stick, supporting him - almost parallel with his left leg. The other is under his chin, connecting with his knee, and allowing the line of his left leg to continue up his left arm to the tree, and the line then continues up the stump of the tree to the right, with the line continuing up the hillocks, and then up the mountains into the imaginary distance out of the frame of the picture.

Are we being shown something by this line?

After the line takes off with the stump, it is paralleled - indeed amplified - by the line of the strange thin branch - with further branches, both with and without leaves - that heads off emphatically into the top right, into infinity.

And just look at the outrageous shock of foliage the tree has at the top, out of all proportion to everything else. And this too extends out of the frame of the picture into an imagined infinity.

Look again at that second upward line, that thin branch that heads off up to the right. That line does not actually start with the tree. But nor does it continue any upward line in the bottom left of the painting.

Look again at the relation between left and right. Look at the hill with the crosses. It runs down to the right. It connects with the dwelling which shifts us smartly forward, nearer to us, to the arch, which continues the line down. And then to the plateau with the musicians. And then just as that line curves down almost vertically into the earth, there is that odd space between the big foreground tree and the musicians' mound. It is a very ambiguous space. Is it a tree stump? I don't know. But look also at the strange growth of tree - growing right out of the mound itself, and forcing our gaze upwards. That sprouting tree connects the downward line with the upward line of the thin branch that leads us up and out of the painting. The downward death of the left, is transformed - who knows how? - with the upward life of the right. And it all happens right above Job's head.

This is the resurrection. Not the resurrection itself. But an anticipation of the resurrection, a sense that this is not the end of the story, that there is change on the way.

So visually for me it is the tree. It is a tree of life of a sort.

But conceptually what stands out for me is the musician on the right, standing next to the dead split tree, playing his instrument. That instrument too makes an upward line, which is continued by that tree. And where that line in the background intercepts the big tree in the foreground: that is where the shock of foliage begins, more or less. The music is connected in a line with the foliage. This is not, I think, a chance encounter.

They are linked – the foliage and the music.

‘Music in the distance’. That would be my alternative title for this extraordinary painting.

And then there is the colour. The reds - lots of reds. The red of John, of Mary, of Job, of the supporting structure under the dead Christ, of the broken column, of the clothes of Nicodemus and his companion, of the disciples in the fields and - overwhelmingly for me - of the standing musician. That is a really deep bold red against the grey sky. It is somehow more red than it has a right to be.

What of us, the viewer?

This is a kind of liturgical painting, for a non-liturgical day.

It is a painting for us to wait by, to wait with, to wait in. We are Job. We are John. We hold our heads, and we wait patiently, and we wait in mourning. We confront grief and silence. We remember our own approaching deaths - all those skulls, those *memento mori* skulls. We contemplate our shattered edifices, the broken columns of smashed civilizations, its absurdity signified by the clothed monkey. The end of the past and the wait before the beginning of an utterly different future. It is a point in history. Indeed, perhaps it is the birth of history itself, where time - this particular time - starts to matter, in a new way. There is no longer simply a succession of events.

There is a pivot, with a before and an after, a preparation and a fulfilment. Here, right in front of us, is a particularity which does not follow as an effect from prior causes.

It is itself a generative event. Like the universe itself, it is a *creatio ex nihilo*, a creation out of nothing, out of the nothing of death.

And we, the Church, are created along with it. We see here the broken temple, which will be replaced by a new temple, which is not a building at all, but a body of people, of us, gathered here today.

This is well summarised in the words of Job 19: 25-26, which are meant to be uttered in the minds of the viewer, as we meditate on Job, who himself meditates on the dead Christ.

‘For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God’.