The Last Supper

Salvador Dalí:
The Sacrament of the Last Supper, 1955

Chester Dale Collection

A Sermon preached in
Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge

by the Revd Canon Professor David Brown

on Sunday 25th February 2007
First Sunday in Lent

Of all the paintings that have been the subject of addresses in Chapel this term, the one I have chosen to speak about this evening is perhaps the most controversial. Almost as soon as it entered the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, it was to become that gallery's most popular painting. Yet there was no shortage of professional art critics who came forward to say, so much the worse for public taste. Theologians too are found voicing similar sentiments. The Evangelical writer Francis Schaeffer, for example, describes it as a perversion of Christianity, a descent into the very worst form of irrational mysticism: even the artist's wife Gala has taken the place of Christ, since it is her face that we see instead of Christ's. Liberal Christianity evinced not dissimilar convictions. Paul Tillich declared the painting mere kitsch, with among other things Christ replaced by someone who looks most like a basketball player. Both are adamant that it completely fails to represent the ethos of Last Supper, though that was Dalí's intention.

But was it? What I would like to suggest is that both theologians rush too quickly to judgment, and so fail to engage adequately with the symbolism in the painting. Even a cursory glance at the title chosen by Dalí would have indicated a more complicated dialectic that they suppose. Dalí entitled it not simply 'The Last Supper' but 'The Sacrament of the Last Supper.' What that implies, I suggest, is Dalí's desire to take us beyond one particular evening two thousand years ago into its lasting and permanent significance.

Look first at the figures of the apostles. Not only is there no real attempt at individualisation, they do not even look at Christ. Instead, their gaze is directed either downwards or towards the bread and the beaker of wine. Not only that, Christ seems almost on the verge of disappearing from the scene. Certainly, Tillich can scarcely have been to many basketball games in the 1950s if he thought this long haired individual resembled a typical player. Not only are the features, as already noted, those of a woman but there is so little muscle there that the figure is on the verge of insubstantiality. Observe how even one of the fishing boats passes through his body. So the theme is not an actual historical event but how that event, despite its receding ever further in the more distant past, continues to exercise its impact upon us in the here and now, in the bread and in the wine. So that is why the disciples are allowed to appear more like genuflecting monks or priests rather than Galilean fishermen.

The fishing boats in the background may suggest otherwise, but the real motive for their presence is in actual fact quite different. At one level one might give an explanation in historical precedent. Ever since Leonardo da Vinci had painted his famous version of the Last Supper with views out into the open countryside beyond, numerous artists had followed suit. Equally, in portraying one of the apostles in orange Dalí follows the example of Giotto, in using that colour to indicate the traitor Judas. But there is, I think, something rather more at stake here, and that is the way in which the open view beyond suggests an event that will itself open up, again and again, to the ordinary and to the everyday in our lives. The scene depicted is in fact of the bay at Port Lligat, Dalí's home town in north-eastern Spain.

I have yet to mention what is the most obvious pointer in this direction, and that is the massive figure with outstretched arms who towers over Christ. It is to this figure with his right hand raised heavenwards that Christ points, while, less conspicuously, he uses his left to point to himself. It is just possible that there is an allusion here to John 12.45 where Christ declares that whoever has seen him has seen the Father, but, more probably, it is an allusion to the ascended Christ now in heaven, and as a result accessible to all in each celebration of the eucharist.

That insistence on looking beyond surface appearances remained integral to Dalí's approach to art through out his life. He had been brought up in an atheist home. Some of his earlier pictures are virulently antireligious; some even border on the blasphemous. Inevitably, his conversion to Christianity in his thirties resulted in many changed attitudes, but it did not alter his obsession with symbolism. However, whereas Freudian categories dominated his earlier Surrealist art, now he sought by similar means to free his new faith from too much literalism. Literal depictions of what had happened in Christ's life he believed could only mislead, because people would then focus on the transitory and historical rather than what had permanent significance. Nowadays, Grünewald's

Issenheim Altarpiece is among the popular depictions of the crucifixion. But Dalí absolutely loathed the painting with its remorseless depiction of Christ in utter agony. For him it meant the viewer wallowing in the suffering instead of getting beyond that suffering and seeing its point.

But he was no less severe on Christians who were suspicious of modern science. In his view, atomic physics could be used to confirm the truth of religion, since it helps dissolve any absolute cleavage between the physical and the spiritual. The two worlds were in fact much more alike than people had once thought. So here, as in quite a number of his other paintings at this time, we are meant to think of Christ dissolving into a more fundamental reality in much the same way as matter can be split into atoms. Not that he wanted to suggest that it was the same process. Rather, the point is that it is not the dissolution of Christ's physical body that ultimately matters. What does is its transformation into the great figure above.

Even here, though, Dalí takes steps to ensure that any easy transition towards literalism is effectively blocked. Alongside the scientific symbolism, there is the architectural. Like Leonardo he uses the proportions known as the golden section in the way the figures are distributed. But he also introduces, as an overall frame, a dodecahedron or twelve-sided figure. Twelve is, of course, along with seven, a conventional Christian symbol for perfection. But that is not the only point here. Try to complete this particular geometrical figure, and you will discover that it is unstable in relation to the painting as a whole. It fails to provide a flat surface or floor anywhere, and so cannot be easily integrated into the rest of what we see. So, even while seeking to relate earthly and heavenly realities, Dalí denies us any easy transition from one to the other. Symbolism is there to make us think and reflect, not ever to call a definitive halt to such reflection.

But what relevance might this have for the practice of our Christian faith? Perhaps we might use Dalí's symbolism to carry his own argument further. Dalí could scarcely have known this, but less than a decade later those kneeling priests would evoke an already vanished world. The Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s suggested quite different ways of celebrating the eucharist. Even the laity were now allowed to stand to receive the elements. So, as that example illustrates, what is transient in the Christian faith, what permanent, is not always an easy matter to determine. Again, Jesus would have reclined at the Last Supper; we sit to eat. Jesus would usually have stood to pray, with hands uplifted; we normally kneel. Symbolism comes and goes, and the important question to ask is not how things once were done but how best to convey the same meaning in new circumstances.

Nor are more doctrinal issues necessarily any different. The constant temptation on our part is to attempt closure, to offer a definitive account of what Jesus meant: whether at the one extreme we talk of there being mere symbol and nothing more, or at the other of a complete equation between the bread and wine and Christ's body and blood. But if one reads St Thomas Aquinas' defence of transubstantiation what one finds is more questions left open than are closed. Similarly, although George Herbert is a Calvinist, when it comes to his poetry he does not hesitate to use the analogy of the wine-press, and so speak of:

Even God himself, being presséd for my sake.

In other words, in both cases the symbol is allowed full power, and not just reduced to some simple equation.

To sum up, in each and every eucharist Jesus comes anew to renew his relationship with us. But he comes not as a figure of the first century but as someone resurrected and ascended, who transcends all our attempts to define him. He comes, as Dalí saw, not limited to any one particular time or place, and certainly not just to the Upper Room of the Last Supper, but as someone liberated by such symbols to be with us now and for ever. Amen.