

Trinity College Cambridge

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Scenes from the Life of Christ: Crucifixion

Lucas Cranach the Younger's *Crucifixion* (1555)

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He was 'no groundbreaker but was certainly a skilful communicator', says a contemporary scholar of Cranach.¹

While the first half of the assertion is almost undoubtedly true, the second half is perhaps better left to your own judgement. Lucas Cranach's workshop was, above all, highly efficient and well-staffed, considered to be the most productive workshop of the sixteenth century. Over a thousand of his paintings have survived to this day.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, who is thought to have played a part in producing this painting of the crucifixion, had a close personal friendship with the reforming theologian Martin Luther; a fact which helps to explain Luther's position, with Cranach, at the foot of the cross. Luther and Cranach the Elder were godfathers to one another's children, and Cranach began in earnest to support his friend by taking the lead in publishing the newly translated German New Testament.

There followed on from this highly successful business endeavour a newly devised Protestant iconography, often highly polemical and strongly didactic. It is the didactic feature of much of the work produced in the Cranach studio which is most evident in what we have before us. At the same time as he was working tirelessly for Luther, Cranach continued to work for the Catholic side, painting numerous portraits of Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg (1490–1545) and his nephew Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg (1505–71). Old Beliefs continued to be directed at the Reformation, and the Cranachs were something of what we might regard as equal opportunity employees, ecumenical well ahead of their time.

The picture is nearly ideal as a work of Lutheran catechesis. It is as though all that is necessary unto salvation has been contained in one busy, if not overly beautiful, image. In the background, visible between Jesus' left leg and the upstretched arm of the camel-hair wearing John the Baptist, is Moses, standing on the barren path, holding the two tablets of stone containing the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, the Old Law, the word which, on its own, could only drive the sinner to despair of his own ability to save himself. On the other side of the cross, leading away from Moses, is death, personified as a spear-wielding skeleton, along with a monstrous-looking devil carrying a club.

¹ Bodo Brinkmann, ed., 'The Smile of the Madonna. Lucas Cranach a Serial Painter', in *Cranach* (London: The Royal Academy of the Arts, 2008), p. 25.

Together, both the Law and death chase unregenerate humanity into the flames of hell. Lex semper accusat. The Law always accuses.²

In the top right corner of the painting, a similarly barren and stony patch of earth as that occupied by Moses is populated both by humans and snakes. This scene reminds the viewer of the story of the people being bitten by snakes in the wilderness (Numbers 21: 4–9) and God providing a way of escape, a prefigurement of Jesus' death on the cross. Just as the stricken Israelites would look to the bronze serpent raised up before them, so too all people, a new Israel, would look to the fulfilment of the Law, lifted up before them on the cross; and, in looking, they would live. Were you able to magnify the text of the open Bible in Luther's hands, you would discover that the third passage, written in German, reads: Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3: 14).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the painting is dominated by the crucifix, its prominence accentuated by the fact that it spans nearly the entire height of the painting. On Jesus' left stands John the Baptist, next to John the Baptist the artist himself, and next to the artist Luther, open Bible in hand. John the Baptist, the human link between Old and New, a figure who functions simultaneously as the final Old Testament prophet and the first New Testament disciple; herald of the coming Messiah, the straps of whose sandals he felt unworthy to loose, is placed alongside those who, long after his martyrdom, would in brushstroke and treatise proclaim the same Messiah.

This scene at the front of the painting is, according to a crucial Reformation distinction, the counterbalance to that which always accuses, the Law. Here, in and around this crucifix, we find pictured the Gospel, the good news, the word which always and only absolves and frees humankind.

Similar to other notable artistic depictions of the crucifixion, a lamb stands at the foot of the cross, alive and bearing a nearly transparent banner. The banner reads, in Latin: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, words spoken by none other than John the Baptist, whose right hand points upwards at the crucified Christ, and whose left hand points downwards at the lamb. It is as if to say that here we see the whole of salvation history displayed before our eyes, from the sacrificial animals of old to the sacrificial Lamb of God. Here is John proclaiming to the artist the Lamb of God, the Saviour, with Cranach representing all who would believe. The single stream of blood flowing from the pierced side of Christ falls on Cranach; the crucifixion is for him, as it is for all. The first verse written in the open book proclaims: the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1: 7).

It is the third verse, however, to which Luther's finger directly points, and it reads: Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4: 16). If the events occurring behind the crucifixion serve to cause the viewer to deny himself and admit his own inferiority before the perfect Law of God, the events in the foreground encourage the opposite.

² Article IV.38, The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 126.

But it is not on the basis of the crucifixion alone that such boldness before God is possible. To Jesus' right, standing next to the cross, is a figure victorious and triumphant. This is not St Michael slaying the dragon, but rather the resurrected Christ, his red cloak splendidly trimmed with the gold of Easter. The old Adam, sin, is dead; the devil, pale and lifeless, is defeated. In Cranach's treatment of the crucifixion, there is no separate panel for the resurrection. The crucifixion simply cannot be viewed, nor can it be understood, independently of the resurrection.

One must look at the resurrection if one is to look at the crucifixion, and one must bear the sight of the crucified Christ if one is to glory in Christ the victor. The banner borne by the lamb, proclaiming behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is, in the painting, of the same piece of cloth as the gold-trimmed cloak of the living Jesus; who, in turn, holds the victor's spear which has at its opposite end the flag of the Lamb of God, superimposed on the stone above the opening to the empty tomb. This is One whose sacrifice is made sense of in the light of his resurrection.

Clearly, this painting was intended as an aid to teaching the 'new faith' or, to put it negatively, as a piece of Reformation propaganda. But it was also painted as an inspiration to devotion, forming the central panel of the Weimar Altarpiece, where it remains to this day in the Stadtkirche of Saints Peter and Paul. For Cranach, as for Luther, as for many others, teaching and devotion were not to be understood as conflicting purposes. To be taught was to enter into a great act of devotion; to worship assumed and required that the one who did so knew whom it was he was worshiping.

Contemporary discussions of the crucifixion tend to lead rather quickly into quarrels over so-called theories of the atonement, the details of which I cannot even begin to address in the time remaining. Understood charitably, such theories attempt to derive meaning from the event of Christ's death. Critics, both within the Church and those speaking from outside of the Church, point out the problems with such theories, noting that often they seem overly elaborate. Atonement theories, according to one theologian, may be guilty of 'requiring God to devise complex stratagems for dealing with problems that, if he is indeed as almighty as the theories generally maintain, he ought to be able to deal with in a much simpler way'.³

Whatever theories seem to us most convincing, should we care – and it seems unlikely that Cranach had any one particular understanding in mind, the painting seems to suggest that the crucifixion of Jesus, together with his resurrection is, to quote the Nicene Creed, 'for us and for our salvation', and that such an affirmation is entirely adequate. By encouraging us to keep a holy and sober Lent, the artist necessarily also wishes us a joyful Eastertide.

Taking one final look at the painting, you will see that the base of the cross is placed not in the stony and barren earth of the background, but in the lush green grass of a new order of things. Even at that moment of death, and at the very moment when Christ cried out to his Father with the words of the psalmist, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, the picture tells us of something better, far better, just around the corner.

³ George Pattison, *A Short Course in Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 2005), p. 97.