

The Crucifixion

Jacopo Tintoretto: The Crucifixion of Christ, 1565
(in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice)

A Sermon preached in
Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge

by the Rt Revd Professor Stephen Sykes

on Sunday 4th March 2007
Second Sunday in Lent

Psalm 69: 16-21

John 19: 23-30

Your Dean has set me the task of preaching on St John's account of the crucifixion and death of Jesus, but illuminated by a painting - tonight by the Venetian master, Jacopo Tintoretto. This is an exercise for which, unlike several of your preachers this term, I have absolutely no special competence. In 2002, my wife and I had the pleasure of spending two weeks in Venice; indeed, on Good Friday we sat for an hour in front of this massive picture which (as you gaze at an A4 representation of it) is over twelve metres long and five metres high. But that experience did have a huge impact on me. Not before or since have I had the opportunity of sitting and looking, for such an extended period of time, at any painting, even if that inspection was hardly more than a "naïve stare", and the substance of this evening's sermons is derived as much, or even mainly, from the Gospel itself.

The reading began with the words 'When the soldiers had crucified Jesus', and this is what much of the activity of the picture is concerned with. To the right of Jesus one of the two others crucified with him is being roped to a cross. To the left of Jesus the cross of the second is being hauled into an upright position, into a hole which has already been dug. Here was a dramatic technique Tintoretto had already used in his 1548 picture, *Christ washing his disciples' feet*, in which successive phases of the same act are depicted: the removal of the footwear, the washing of feet, and the covering of the feet again. The drama of the crucifixion is heightened by showing what the soldiers had already done.

In the foreground, at the right, lying by itself at the feet of the man digging a hole for the cross, is the tunic of Jesus, woven without a seam in one piece, for which two soldiers, crouched in a cave to the left of the digger, are evidently playing dice.

‘This is what the soldiers did’, the account continues. ‘Meanwhile near the cross on which Jesus hung, his mother was standing, with her sister, Mary wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala.’ In striking contrast to the mostly uncaring activity of the rest of the picture, at the foot of the cross Tintoretto paints a group of women and men deeply affected by Jesus’ suffering. A young man on the left gazes at Jesus: John, the beloved disciple, who has just been charged with the care of Mary. Immediately beneath him is, conventionally, the figure of Nicodemus, often a portrait of the artist or his patron: in this case it is thought to be a member of the Grand Confraternity of St Roch, who commissioned the picture. Mary herself, the mother of all the faithful, is an object of devotion, and the figure is respectfully kissing her hand, his arms crossed over his chest.

‘After this Jesus, aware that all had now come to its appointed end, said, I thirst.’ Here we need to remind ourselves of the intention lying behind the Confraternity of St Roch. There were altogether five *Scuole Grandi* in Venice, which offered craftsmen, middle-class merchants and freelance professionals the opportunity of participating in a kind of social club and insurance company. Members were provided with a decent burial and assistance at times of need, for instance if they fell sick or had an accident; benefits could take the form of a pension, housing, or even a dowry for unmarried daughters. The Confraternities were in competition with each other for social prestige, but they were still in intention and actuality charitable institutions. A picture which illustrated the kindly gesture of offering wine to the crucified Jesus, which you can see immediately to the left of the cross, was appropriate to its boardroom’s gallery. And the words ‘I thirst’, spoken by Jesus as the representative of human suffering, are all the more striking because of the patent unconcern of the majority of the figures in the picture.

Indeed, it is precisely the contrast between the extreme busyness of the greater part of the picture, and the way in which the central figures are portrayed, which is the most striking aspect of this painting. On the extreme right and left of the canvas, and again to the right and left of the crucified figure, Tintoretto has painted horses and riders. On the right, a group of travellers appear to have just arrived on the scene and are summing up the goings-on. A well-dressed man on horseback, within his hand on his hip, is plainly appraising the whole situation. There is no overt hostility but his clothes and his manner speak their own commentary on the crucifixion which has taken place.

But how is Jesus, the crucified one, represented? 'Having received the wine', says the Gospel narrative, 'Jesus said, "It is accomplished!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.' The Johannine passion narrative presents Jesus as dying the kind of death he foresaw. Whereas the Jesus of Mark and Matthew is mocked on the cross, and the Jesus of Luke is forgiving, the picture given us in the Gospel of John is one of triumph, the lifting up of the Son of Man. The Roman soldiers fulfill Scripture by dividing his garments; the vinegary wine given to Jesus confirms another aspect of the Old Testament. And though he dies alone, in the persons of the beloved disciple and his mother he leaves behind the nucleus of a community of believers. Knowing then that he has completed the Scriptures, and all that his Father sent him to do, Jesus said, 'It is finished' and laid down his life of his own accord, as he said he would. A modern biblical scholar, the late Raymond Brown, has written in his study of the passion narratives, 'the Markan Jesus is a victor only in the eyes of God; the Lucan Jesus is a victor in the eyes of his believing followers, but the Johannine Jesus is a victor for all to see' (p. 35).

And that is how Tintoretto has painted him. The upper part of the figure of Jesus is surrounded by an aureole, a brilliant circle of light. It seems to have separated from the Cross, giving the impression that the Redeemer has been brought out of the area of the picture itself and into the viewer's space.

For all that, I would readily admit that this may not be an easy picture with which to identify, compared, say, with the Issenheim Christ, lacerated with the marks of human suffering, identified with the physical evils of human life. On the other hand, Tintoretto has undoubtedly caught aspects of John's passion narrative, the narrative that has made Good Friday good, the narrative of the glory that was crucifixion. He has caught the sense of the words of the first letter of John: 'Whoever is begotten by God conquers the world, and the victory that conquers the world is, our faith'. (5:4)

I recall that as we sat in front of this picture, lost in it, in all its detail and the vigour of activity, I became aware of a tourist who had entered the room and placed himself in front of the picture. He was a young man, possibly sixteen or seventeen, plainly in tow and probably in an advanced state of cultural fatigue. And in a way I could depict better than I can describe, he began a kind of war dance, picking up his feet and curling the upper part of his body, his arms on the level of his shoulders. And then I realized he was practising pitching at baseball; pitching, on Good Friday, in front of Tintoretto's Crucifixion in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, in Venice!

But, on reflection, here was another human preoccupation, no different in kind from the many instances Tintoretto had already represented in his picture, and though he might not know it, then or

indeed ever, Jesus had given his life because he loved that young man and wanted him to have the right to become a child of God.

‘This is what love really is’, said the letter of John, written after the Gospel and a kind of commentary on it, ‘not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins’ (4: 9); and the single-minded pursuit of that love, in the midst of human preoccupations, including a readiness to suffer, gives the crucifixion an objectivity and a permanence which can embrace us too.

Bibliography

Roland Krischel: *Jacopo Tintoretto (1519-1594)* (Könemann; Köln 2000)

Raymond E. Brown: *The Death of the Messiah* (Chapman; London 1994), vols. I & II