

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 16: The Resurrection

Text: **Luke 24:25-35**

Image: **‘The Supper at Emmaus’**, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1601, NG172

Reflection:

This is one of the most famous paintings, by one of the greatest artists, in the National Gallery collection. We could talk about this painting for a week and not exhaust it. I have seven minutes this morning. So I’m going to focus on one thing only, and that is ‘recognition’.

The Supper at Emmaus is a ‘recognition event’: an occasion when people recognise the presence of God. There are recognition events throughout the Bible and they are mysterious, and utterly compelling.

The gospels describe Jesus as having a miraculous birth, as performing miracles, and as rising from the dead; and the disciples – at key moments – *recognise* what these events mean: that Jesus is the Son of God. Not just another wonder worker or magician, but divine.

The disciples move through amazement, through surprise and confusion, to understanding. And that experience of confusion, followed by recognition, is a crucial one. The recognition of the apparently unfamiliar is a key factor in Christian experience.

The first *post-resurrection* recognition event is Mary Magdalene at the tomb, realising that the man she is talking to ‘the gardener,’ who turns out to be Christ. And then comes the Supper at Emmaus. The disciples have travelled with Christ, not realising with whom they speak.

Then, ‘when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.’ They had *not* seen: suddenly they *did* see. A gesture – a reminder of what Christ did at the Last Supper – has alerted them to his identity.

As the etymology of the word suggests, recognition involves an awareness which harks back to something *previous*. It is a *re*-knowing of something which therefore requires a *pre*-knowing. It involves a kind of memory. At Emmaus, the memory is of the Last Supper.

But the capacity to recognise God's presence is not always tied to a specific action in this way. The memory of God is the vestige or trace of the image of God which remains in human beings after the Fall. It is the bit of human nature which seeks to be in right relation to God, and which means that we *can* be redeemed. It is the 'memory' of a state of grace which enables a return to it.

The terms associated with salvation (repentance, atonement and so on) indicate a *return* to somewhere, to something – someone – *already* experienced. This 'redeemable memory' is at work when people recognise the presence of God. Even in their shock and grief after the Crucifixion, after their journey, and their preoccupation with the recent events, the disciples are finally able to recognise Christ at supper with them.

Let's be honest: the Incarnation and the Resurrection are confusing. They are paradoxical. We may find them baffling, overwhelming, perhaps even hard to accept.

Images like this one are a visual accompaniment to our struggle to understand. The images themselves struggle: how can a painting really portray Christ, fully man and fully divine? It can't. It is only ever a failed attempt. But the failed attempt is valuable precisely because it 'recognises', it 'visualises' our struggle to recognise God.

In its entirely proper failure to depict God's presence on earth it reminds us of that crucial passage from amazement and confusion to recognition. It reminds us of the ease with which we can overlook God's presence. It prompts us to *pay attention*.

For artists, the challenge of painting Christ is the challenge to paint someone to be encountered as a stranger and then recognised; to paint the familiar and unfamiliar. The artist cannot provide the viewer with the access to Christ which those who encountered him during his life time had; but the artist may be able to engender something like the recognition experienced by those who first understood who Christ was.

And so Caravaggio presents us with a scene which is startling, rather than entirely familiar. He allows us to see what the disciples have just seen. But also to see why they might have overlooked what was right in front of them until *this* moment.

Christ is blessing the bread but his left hand is partially obscured by the roasted fowl. His right hand points towards us but we have to work a little to distinguish the central cluster of bird, bread and hand. This is, of course, a communion table, but Caravaggio has not cleared away the paraphernalia of a normal supper to make that obvious. We have to pick out the fair linen, the bread, the water and the wine.

And the Christ who blesses is depicted as beardless and youthful: perfect sacrifice as well as priest. Although this was a common way of depicting Christ in early Christian art, it became more usual to depict him with a beard. The youthful authority of this figure is particularly striking in contrast to the older, hairier and rather grizzled disciples.

It's a scene which compels our attention. And Caravaggio, having stopped us in our tracks, gives us various 'ways into' it. We are drawn forwards by Christ's right hand. But other things pull us in too.

The painting 'breaks into' our space with same surprising ease with which the resurrected Christ appears and vanishes. The outstretched arms of the disciple on the right form a bridge between us and the figure of Christ and reach out to us. The chair of the disciple on the left is pushed backwards into 'our' space as he starts forward. His elbows project backwards, a tear in one sleeve revealing his shirt in a flash of eye-catching white. Even the basket of fruit is about to topple into our space and cries out to us to catch it.

These are things that reach out and pull us in. We are invited to this communion table. We are alongside the disciples as their eyes are opened. We are challenged to be alert to the presence of God and to recognise it amongst us.

Reflection by Dr Chloë Reddaway

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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 16: The Resurrection

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Revealing God, who has shown yourself to us in the person of Jesus Christ,
come and open our eyes and enlighten our hearts, that we may recognise the glory of
God among us,
and might know the hope to which we have been called;
to the glory of your name. Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 17: The Ascension

Text: Acts 1:1-12

Image: ‘The Incredulity of Saint Thomas’, Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano, about.1502-4, NG816

Reflection:

Today’s subject is the Ascension and, as you’ll have noticed, this painting does not depict the Ascension. Why then are we looking at *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* instead?

The Ascension is Jesus’ departure from earth. He leaves the disciples. His physical, living, body is no longer with them. The physicality of this event means that it is very important that the disciples already know for certain that Jesus has risen from the dead. If they think that he is a ghost, or an illusion, then his Ascension won’t have anything like its true significance.

As we read in the passage in Acts, ‘After his suffering [Jesus] presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.’ The disciples are given ‘convincing proofs’ of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. They need this *before* his Ascension if they are to understand what that Ascension means. Jesus does a number of things to ‘convince’ his disciples that he is alive again. He eats and drinks. He also invites Thomas to touch his wounds, and that’s the scene we see here.

This early 16th century painting by the Venetian artist, Cima da Conegliano, shows the Resurrected Christ surrounded by the disciples. We can see the wounds in his hands and feet made by the nails, and the wound in his side made by the spear. Christ is looking at Thomas – in the green and red – and Thomas is leaning forward to touch the wound in Christ’s side.

The story of ‘The Incredulity of Saint Thomas’ comes from the Gospel of John (John 20:19-27). After his death and resurrection, Christ appears first to Mary Magdalene, outside his tomb and, later that evening to the other disciples. They are in a locked room, and he comes in and shows them his wounds.

But Thomas isn’t with them, and when the others tell him that they have seen Christ, he doesn’t believe them. He says that he won’t believe them unless he sees and touches the wounds himself. A week later Thomas is with the other disciples and, again, despite the doors being closed, Christ comes in and stands among them.

Christ tells Thomas to look at his hands and touch them, to 'reach out' his hand and put it in his side wound, and he says 'Do not doubt, but believe'. This is the moment which we are seeing in the painting and Doubting Thomas, as he's often called, immediately responds, 'My Lord and my God!'

It's easy to sympathise with Thomas. The teacher he has been following has died a violent and humiliating death, all his hopes have been dashed, and now his friends are talking about seeing the teacher walking around, appearing in rooms where the doors have been locked, and speaking to them. They say that they've seen his wounds, so they know that he really is the same Jesus. Thomas hasn't seen this. Why should he believe them? Would you? Thomas wants the empirical evidence of his own eyes.

In a sense, Doubting Thomas stands for anyone who struggles with the concept of the Incarnation, anyone who finds it hard to understand Christ's full humanity and full divinity. We see him here, overwhelmed by seeing – perhaps even touching- the body of a man he knows has already died but who is here in front of him, walking, talking, breathing. He's reaching out to touch Christ, but his realisation that Christ is God comes even as he reaches. We note that the gospel doesn't tell us whether Thomas actually touched Christ. It simply relates Christ's invitation to him to do so, and Thomas' confession of Christ as his Lord and his God. Seeing may have been sufficient for believing in Doubting Thomas' case, but showing him reaching out and touching Christ certainly makes a better picture.

Cima's painting shows us how much that realisation matters. If we don't accept both Christ's humanity and his divinity, then we won't understand the Ascension. We won't fully absorb the redemptive effect of the Crucifixion, and we won't appreciate that Christ is leaving earth to return to heaven (however, and wherever, we think of it) and that there is an eternal life for his disciples beyond this earthly experience.

Christ said to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Inevitably, most Christians have not had the opportunity to see Christ in the flesh. In that sense, believing without the empirical evidence of touch and sight becomes even more important for Christians after the Ascension.

But the Incarnation is also the justification for Christian art: because God made Godself visible to us in Christ, we can represent that visibility in images. For Christians who have not seen Christ either before or after his Resurrection, pictures can be very helpful! This isn't a question of providing a visual Bible for the illiterate. It isn't simply about illustrating a narrative. It is about engaging the imagination as another way of encountering Christ.

There are glorious paintings of the Ascension, but it's a subject which can sometimes border on the ridiculous. An airborne, floating, Jesus can seem more theatrical than dramatic. A pair of feet disappearing into the clouds can easily look a bit daft. Cima's painting avoids that. It's called 'The Incredulity of Saint Thomas' but we could justifiably rename it 'The Reassurance of Saint Thomas' and give it the subtitle, 'An Intimation of the Ascension'. Because Cima's painting doesn't leave us in the room with the closed doors, with Thomas reaching out. It points us forwards – or rather upwards – to the Ascension.

How many paintings have a large, blank, grey wall at the centre? This empty expanse of wall behind Christ – a space two thirds as high as he is – pulls our eyes upwards, out of the crush of figures pressed around Christ, into this ‘in-between’, transitional space, and up to the celestial blue and gold of the ceiling.

The blankness of the wall allows us to imagine Christ’s body ascending into that space, lifting up into the heavens. Cima ensures that we understand that the body that will ascend is truly Jesus, and leaves the rest to our imaginations.

Reflection by Dr Chloë Reddaway

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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 17: The Ascension

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Gracious God,

who has accomplished our salvation through your Son Jesus Christ, who has ascended and is now seated at your right hand in glory;

comfort us in our times of feeling lonely and abandoned;

and grant that we might wait patiently for the coming of your Spirit in our lives, ready to be sent out for the work you have for us in sharing your good news.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 18: Pentecost

Text: Acts 2:1-39 (extracts)

Image: ‘Pentecost’, Giotto and Workshop, about.1310-18, NG5360

A note on the artist and painting:

This work is by Giotto di Bondone, known as Giotto, born in c.1266, and died in 1337. He was an Italian painter and architect from Florence. Although little is known of his life, he is considered the first in a line of great artists who contributed to the Renaissance. His painting was seen as making a decisive break with the prevalent Byzantine style and, as his later biographer put it, as initiating “the great art of painting as we know it today, introducing the technique of drawing accurately from life, neglected for more than two hundred years.” Giotto’s masterwork is the decoration of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. This painting of Pentecost is probably the last of seven scenes from the life of Christ that formed part of a long altarpiece, painted in about 1310, on a single plank of wood, for a church near Florence.

Reflection:

Before our reflection, let’s start by hearing part of the story from Acts 2. [Reading]

The story of Pentecost is a generally more familiar to us than the Ascension which we looked at last week. But as before, let’s see if we can draw out some key theological insights from the story.

A first thing to note concerns the significance of the loud sound like a violent wind, and the tongues of fire. This is a clear sign of an encounter with the presence of God that echoes similar such encounters in the Old Testament. It especially resonates with the giving of the law on mount Sinai in Exodus 19 where we read: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire [and] ... the whole mountain shook violently.” So Luke is letting us know that this event is a special meeting with God. I think that Giotto is trying to capture something of this in the glowing gold of his painting.

A second point to register is that, while we can reasonably see this Pentecost event as the beginning of the story of the Church, we should also see it as the continuation of the story of Jesus. Although Jesus has died, been resurrected, and recently ascended to heaven, that is not the end of Jesus’ story. His story continues here. It continues through the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of our Trinitarian God.

And just as Jesus' public ministry was marked by the Holy Spirit coming down on him at his baptism, and him being filled with the Holy Spirit, so in a similar way the Holy Spirit comes down upon the disciples at the beginning of their public mission, and "all of them" are filled with the Holy Spirit. In his painting Giotto seems to suggest that the "all of them" is just the twelve apostles; but I don't think this adequately reflects Luke's account in the gospel. For it is most likely that it's the group of 120 identified in Acts 1 who are those who "were all together in one place" at the start of Acts 2. This also chimes with the large number of different languages which the crowd hear the disciples speaking in, with more than 12 different locations from around the then known world named in Luke's long list. And this suggests that there were at least a dozen different mother tongues. Again this is an aspect of the story which Giotto doesn't adequately depict in his painting, with just three outsiders listening in to the group of disciples, acting as tokens of the wider group.

The conclusion that it would have been the full group of 120 disciples also makes more sense when we connect with a third point worth emphasising from this story, which is the universal nature of what God is doing. This is evident in the way that *all* the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit; in the fact that Jews "from every nation under heaven" were gathered in Jerusalem and hear the disciples speaking in their own language; in the promise that Peter quotes from Joel that God will pour out the Spirit upon *all* flesh, including both men and women, young and old. And we can also infer from the multitude of different languages spoken by the disciples, that this '*all*' means people of every language and ethnicity.

So all the usual distinctions of gender, age, status and ethnicity are swept aside in this universal action of God in pouring out the Spirit upon human beings. And Peter reinforces this at the end of his sermon, when he says: "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for *all* who are far away, *everyone* whom the Lord our God calls to him." At this Pentecost event, it is evident that God wants to form a new and radically inclusive community which embraces every type of person.

A final point is worth drawing out. The coming of the Holy Spirit is a fulfilment of what God has promised, as Jesus has earlier told to his disciples: "see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised" (Luke 24:49). Peter emphasises this aspect of promise in his sermon, speaking of Jesus as, "exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, ... has poured out this that you both see and hear." And Peter goes on to emphasise that this is not something just promised to an elite few who followed Jesus in his earthly ministry, but "the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." This is a promise with a universal invitation. And, as a promise it is a sign that this is what God had always intended. Whatever shape Israel may have taken in the past, what Pentecost reveals is the true shape that God always had planned for Israel, which was to be an all-embracing community.

To recap: the sound like a violent wind and the tongues of fire are signals of a mighty encounter with God's presence; it's an encounter in which Jesus is fully active, through the Holy Spirit, despite no longer being physically present; it's an encounter which reveals the radically inclusive community that God is forming, of women and men, old and young, of every language and ethnicity; and it's an encounter which fulfils what God had long promised and always intended for humanity. So Pentecost really is something to get excited about.

*Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Session 18: Pentecost

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

God of signs and wonders, who poured out your Spirit on your Son Jesus Christ;
fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit and form us into the radically inclusive
community that you always intended for humanity, that as a community we might
be a sign of your extraordinary love and power, and that together we might serve as
people who welcome others into your kingdom.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 19: Death of Stephen

Text: Acts 6:8 – 7:60 (extracts)

Image: ‘The Martyrdom of Saint Stephen’, Possibly by Antonio Carracci, about 1610, NG77

Reflection:

Saint Stephen was the first Christian martyr, and was stoned to death. Saul (the future Saint Paul) guards the clothes of those who stone Stephen outside the city. In the book of Acts, Stephen is described as one of the seven deacons whose job it is to care for the widows in the early Church in Jerusalem. His eloquent speech before the Sanhedrin, in which he shows the great sweep of Jewish history as leading to the birth of Jesus, the long-expected Messiah, and his impassioned plea that all might hear the good news of Jesus, perhaps inevitably, provokes Stephen’s martyrdom by being stoned to death. As the author of Acts, Luke’s description of Stephen bears direct parallels to that of Christ: for example, the passion; being filled with the Holy Spirit; seeing the Son of God as the right hand of God (where Jesus promised he would be); commending his spirit to Jesus, as Jesus commended his to the Father; kneeling as Jesus did in Gethsemane and asking forgiveness for his persecutors. Witnessing to Jesus, by acting like Jesus in every way, is thus seen by Luke as of the essence of the Christian life.

If this painting is definitely by Antonio Carracci, a date of about 1610 would seem likely. Carracci was born in Venice. His father Agostino Carracci was an artist. His godfather was Tintoretto. He began his art studies early and proved an apt scholar. He was taught first by his father, then his uncle Annibale, and he also assisted Guido Reni. So, he was part of a well-connected family of artists and this shows itself in his work; both in the fluency of his technique (which was much admired among his contemporaries) and in his maintenance of the Carracci style. He developed a deep affection for his uncle Annibale, with whom he went to Rome, where most of his work was done. In 1609, when Annibale his uncle and teacher died, he showed his devotion by burying him with great solemnity near the tomb of Raphael. In Rome, Cardinal Tonti employed the talented youth to decorate his chapel, and on its completion he was commissioned to paint the chapel of St Charles Borromeo, and a fresco in one of the rooms of the Pope’s palace at Monte Cavallo. Unlike the martyr he depicts, his was an uneventful career – yet one in which, through his art, he was a witness to Christ.

The Greek word “martus” signifies a “witness”. It is in this sense that the term first appears in Christian literature; the Apostles were “witnesses” of all that they had observed in the public life of Christ. From the beginning, as the story of St Stephen makes clear, the Apostles faced grave dangers, until eventually almost all suffered death for their convictions. Thus, within the lifetime of the Apostles, the term “martus” came to be used in the sense of a witness who at any time might be called upon to deny what he testified to, under penalty of death. From this stage the transition was easy to the ordinary meaning of the term, as used ever since in Christian literature: a martyr, or witness of Christ, as a person who suffers death rather than deny his faith.

There continue to be Christians who experience persecution or martyrdom today and we are called to pray for and to support our brothers and sisters in the persecuted Church. It is, probably unlikely that we will share with St Stephen in this experience. Even so, we can still share with St Stephen in the other meaning of “martus”; that of being a witness who gives testimony. The missiologist Lesslie Newbigin has noted that testimony is what is given by a witness in a trial. A witness makes his or her statement as part of a trial in which the truth is at stake and where the question, ‘What is the truth?’ is what is being argued. Newbigin has argued that this is what is “at the heart of the biblical vision of the human situation that the believer is a witness who gives his testimony in a trial.”

Where is the trial? It is all around us, it is life itself? In all situations we encounter, there is challenge to our faith and there is a need for us to testify in words and actions to our belief in Christ. Whenever people act as though human beings are entirely self-reliant, there is a challenge to our faith. Whenever people argue that suffering and disasters mean that there cannot be a good God, we are on the witness stand. Whenever people claim that scientific advances or psychological insights can explain away belief in God, we are in the courtroom. Whenever a response of love is called for, our witness is at stake.

What is the content of our testimony? Witnesses are those who have seen or experienced a particular event or sign or happening and who then tell the story of what they have seen or heard as testimony to others. That is what Jesus called us to do before he ascended to the Father; to tell our stories of encountering him to others. So, we don’t have to understand or be able to explain the key doctrines of the Christian faith. We don’t have to be able to tell people the two ways to live or to have memorized the sinner’s prayer or to have tracts to be able to hand out in order to be witnesses to Jesus. All we need to do is to tell our story; to say this is how Jesus made himself real to me and this is the difference that it has made.

We conclude with Malcolm Guite’s poem about St Stephen:

“Witness for Jesus, man of fruitful blood,
Your martyrdom begins and stands for all.
They saw the stones, you saw the face of God,
And sowed a seed that blossomed in St. Paul.
When Saul departed breathing threats and slaughter
He had to pass through that Damascus gate

Where he had held the coats and heard the laughter
As Christ, alive in you, forgave his hate,
And showed him the same light you saw from heaven
And taught him, through his blindness, how to see;
Christ did not ask 'Why were you stoning Stephen?'
But 'Saul, why are you persecuting me?'
Each martyr after you adds to his story,
As clouds of witness shine through clouds of glory."

*Reflection by Revd Jonathan Evens
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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 19: Death of Stephen

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Gracious Father, who gave the first martyr Stephen grace to pray for those who took up stones against him:

grant that in all our sufferings for the truth we may learn to love even our enemies and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt, looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us, Jesus Christ, our Mediator and Advocate,

who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 20: Saint Peter

Text: Acts 10:30-48

Image: ‘Christ appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way (Domine, Quo Vadis?)’, Annibale Carracci, 1601-2, NG9

Reflection:

Before our reflection, let’s start by hearing the story from Acts. [Reading]

Our painting today, ‘*Christ appearing to St Peter on the Appian Way*’, is not a depiction of the passage we’ve just heard, about the conversion of Cornelius. Rather it contains some themes that resonate with this story from Acts.

As well as continuing the journey in Acts, we also remain with the Carracci family of painters that you explored last week with the Martyrdom of Saint Stephen, which is probably by Antonio Caracci. Today’s painting is by his uncle Annibale Caracci who taught Antonio and for whom he had a deep affection. The Caracci family are often credited with initiating the first phase of Baroque art and a return to greater naturalism. You will have seen that in last week’s painting with its bold rich colours set in a naturalistic landscape.

The painting depicts an incident that we don’t find in the New Testament. According to tradition, during the persecutions under Nero, Peter fled from Rome and on the Appian Way encountered a vision of the risen Christ carrying his cross. In answer to Peter’s question ‘Lord, where are you going?’, Christ replied that he was going to Rome to be crucified a second time. Peter himself then returned to Rome, where he was later martyred in the year 67. (Tradition has it, by choosing to be crucified upside down.) This encounter with the risen Christ led Peter to turn around and instead of fleeing persecution in Rome (reminiscent of his denying Jesus in the Gospels), he turns to face it, for the sake of Christ.

There are rich colours, reds, blues, reminiscent of the Venetian School (like Titian), light and dark, and the real energy, drama, exuberance and emotional intensity of the Baroque period.

It is a striking encounter. Peter seems to be taken aback by Jesus. Is he fearful? We see the keys at his waist, a traditional symbol of Peter, who had been promised the keys to the kingdom by Jesus (see Matthew 16:19).

As is typical of Baroque art, the viewer is involved emotionally. Jesus is literally coming out of the canvas towards us, we can't remain as outside observers: we become part of the painting. If we engage with the picture, we are affected by it, challenged by it, by the cross and energy of Jesus, And perhaps we are changed by perhaps? Jesus is forceful and strong, pointing the way, and doesn't look like he can be stopped. The effect of this encounter on Peter is that he turns around. It's a conversion experience.

And so how does this relate to the story of Cornelius from Acts 10 & 11? This too is a story of a conversion, which is told several times over, both from Peter's point of view, as well as Cornelius's perspective. It's the longest single narrative in Acts, and so it's a key text. As in the painting, Peter and the other apostles are now 'on the Way' and this story shows us what following Jesus on the way now means. It means being challenged by where the Spirit is leading. Challenging our perceptions and expectations, just as in this painting 'on the way,' Peter is challenged by the risen Christ to be open to change course.

The narrative about Cornelius goes back and forth, with Cornelius and then Peter recounting what happened. Both have visions, both make speeches – in our reading we hear Peter's 'gospel in miniature'. It's about the conversion of a Gentile god-fearer coming to faith. But it's also the conversion of Peter – who is turned around (as we see in the painting) to see things in a different way, led by the Spirit. It is as if the Spirit is like Jesus pointing the way in the painting. This is where God is, this is the kind of community God is creating. Follow me!

Baptising Cornelius and his Gentile family goes against all that Peter has been taught in his Jewish faith, where even to associate and enter the house of a Gentile was forbidden. And so there is no tradition or scripture to back him up, as he orders this Gentile family to be baptised. Instead, Peter simply reacts to what he sees the Holy Spirit doing, the experience he and his fellow apostles have had of the Spirit, and the promptings he has had from God.

If you know the story, you'll recall that before the messengers from Cornelius come to find Peter, Peter has a vision on his rooftop where God encourages him to see all food as clean. Peter is led to understand that this new way of living as a community of God will have no barriers of what is clean and unclean, of insiders and outsiders. Old divisions are broken down, and we see this coming to life in this passage. The new community of the church is forming. There are joyful new possibilities. This is what it means to say 'God shows no partiality'. All are equally welcome, chosen and trusted.

What do we learn from this encounter for today? God is ahead of Peter doing new things. This is a turning point for the early church, where we see insiders willing to receive those considered to be outsiders. Where do we see God ahead of us, opening up new possibilities for life, for community, for sharing the Gospel, with the most unlikely people? Who might we consider 'outsiders' today? And where are we being challenged?

This story and the painting show us the immediacy of Christ in people's lives. In the early church we hear many times of how people's lives are changed and liberated by encounters with the apostles, and the actions of the Holy Spirit. There are stories of being released from prison, of being healed.

Think about your experiences of conversion and those who were part of that for you: they don't need to be ground breaking or earth shattering. Or you might think you haven't had any experience like that! Perhaps it's more helpful to think about where you have known the promptings of the Holy Spirit? Desmond Tutu describes this as 'God pressure': when we have felt compelled to address something, say something, or follow a particular course of action. Where have you changed course, had your perceptions changed or challenged? Perhaps you have been guided by God to be the one who has helped someone else to receive that ground-breaking love that turned their life in a new direction.

The church forms around the actions of God and the promptings of the Spirit breaking new ground amongst people. Where is God breaking new ground and leading the church today? Perhaps around the issues of inequality and poverty in our society, and in the welcome of refugees and those seeking asylum?

Following Jesus means we have to be open to new possibilities and have our own understandings challenged. It is an adventure: we cannot contain God's actions. The Spirit goes ahead of us.

So will we be like Peter in the painting, cowering and fearful? Or will be like Peter in the passage in Acts, boldly going with God into new territory and relationships and possibilities?

*Reflection by Revd Katherine Hedderly
Associate Vicar for Ministry, St Martin-in-the-Fields*



‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 20: Saint Peter

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Lord Jesus, your Holy Spirit is always leading us into new possibilities.

Show us where we are being challenged to love with a new heart; to let go of prejudice and fear; and be open others.

Make us a people who are agents of change for the sake of your gospel, and brave to adventure with you.

Encourage us through experiences of encounter to always follow you on the way – that we may know and share the life, freedom and joy of your kingdom.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 21: Saint Paul

Text: Acts 9:1-19

Image: ‘The Conversion of Saint Paul’, Karel Dujardin, 1662, NG6296

Reflection:

The painting you see is by Karel Dujardin. It is a Dutch painting of the late seventeenth century representing the dramatic moment of St Paul’s conversion. Such subjects of Biblical action had been treated by the Dutch painter Rembrandt and, in the earlier years of the century, by the Dutch followers of Caravaggio, active mainly in Utrecht. Caravaggio had himself also captured this moment of Paul’s conversion, and his painting may well have influenced Dujardin.

Look at the drama of the painting. Here is a vision of God literally bursting into the world, throwing the powerful into confusion, disrupting everything – typified by the frightened eyes of the horses. Each character within the painting reacts differently to this moment of revelation. Notice their different reactions. Saul, soon to be Paul, is at the lower right, with his face hidden from us. In the sky, upper left, cherubs hold a torch and an olive branch. What does that mean?

The artist captures in a frozen image the exact transforming moment which is going to lead to a change in the course of human history. Paul, the one who is “still breathing threats and murder” against the followers of Jesus, here comes face to face with the Christ he’s been persecuting. Yet the vision in the sky remains concealed and mysterious. We understand the vision by the response. It’s as if a tornado has struck, pulling down the mighty in their pomp and power. And at the bottom is the figure of Paul falling, and yet bathed in light. It’s as if he’s been blasted by the love of God.

The conversion of St Paul is the most famous conversion in Christian history. This was the man who had persecuted the followers of Jesus of Nazareth “to the death.” Yet this same man, after his conversion, was going to become the greatest of all Christian missionaries: in little more than ten years Paul was to establish the Church in four provinces of the Roman Empire: Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. Paul also planned missions to the Gentiles in the west. And his missionary letters would influence the future of the whole Christian Church: they form part of the Bible we read today.

Few of us can emulate the drama of Paul's conversion. For many of us our growth towards God has been a more hesitant and spiralling affair. And yet there is a pattern here in God's revelation, something we recognize.

Reflection

Paul tells us that God loves us while we were still sinners. Paul knew that from his own life. He'd been party to the vicious stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He'd heard Stephen's haunting cry asking that God should have mercy on his murderers. If you've ever witnessed violence, you can perhaps imagine the trauma of such a stoning. But, like many today, before his conversion, Paul blocks out the need for forgiveness. He sees himself defending religious righteousness and he cannot afford pity. Later he will cry: "Why do I do the thing I hate?" He shuts out the horror of violence, just as we shut out the horror of war or the suffering of the innocent. He justified himself, as fanatics continue to justify violent persecution or revenge.

Fall

But on the road to Damascus, as Dujardin depicts for us, Saul comes face to face with the blinding light of the Risen Christ. And he hears a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me." The religious fanatic is faced by the horror of his own self-deception. The accuser has become the accused. He is guilty of persecuting the very God he's claimed to serve. Saul falls, blinded by the experience of Christ. Who wants to admit they are guilty? Who wants to be so exposed? Especially when our deepest prejudices fail us, or when pride and image and reputation are broken open and we come face to face with our own sinfulness.

Revelation

It's here, in this moment that God's transformation begins. It's the moment of both fall and grace, a moment of blinding light revealing the Risen Christ. We detect a new gentleness and compassion in the aftermath of Paul's meeting with Christ. An olive branch. Like the offer of hope and redemption after the flood. Paul, now blind, is led forward to Damascus "by the hand." It's as though Christ is holding him and guiding him, preparing Ananias to come in search of him.

And what beautiful, tender words Ananias speaks. He calls the man who has been the disciples' number one enemy, "My brother Saul." He says: "My brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me to you so that you may recover your sight and receive the Holy Spirit." Words not of condemnation, but of healing and of hope. Saul has not been abandoned by God or cursed by God. He's not under judgment; he is under love. God speaks to him not in his strength and pride but in his vulnerability and loss. It's here that the transformation begins. Blessedness begins when we open ourselves up in need to God. Where human power ends, God's power begins.

Commissioning

The sinner will become the witness. This was the meaning of grace that Paul would spend the rest of his life proclaiming. God's love, which is not earned or deserved, but given. The realisation came to Paul that it was not the law or the tradition or his own power which could save him, but only Christ's love. And not because he was good, but because God is good.

And Paul is then commissioned to become the witness of that transforming love. That love was not just for a group of Jews in Jerusalem; rather it was for the whole world. Paul is then prepared to go to the ends of the earth because of his own overwhelming experience of the love of God, received through Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts.” His debt to God is not some enforced duty; rather it’s an act of thanksgiving. The blessing of grace he’s received becomes the source of energy with which he reaches out to others.

Reflection by Revd Richard Carter
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A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Revealing God,

who caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world
through the preaching of your servant Saint Paul:

grant that we might be open to all that you would shew us of the light of your love, and
that we might follow Paul in bearing witness to your truth,

to the praise of your name, amongst all the peoples of this world.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’ Session 22: The New Jerusalem

Text: Revelation 21:1-5, 9-11, 22-27, & 22:1-5

Image: ‘Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven’; central predella panel, probably by Fra Angelico, about 1423-4, NG663.1

A note on the artist and painting:

Fra Angelico (the ‘Angelic friar’ in English) was one of the principal painters of the early Renaissance in Florence. He lived from about 1395 to 1455. He is first recorded as a painter in 1417, aged 22, when he became a novice at the Friary of San Domenico at Fiesole near Florence. This was where he mainly lived, eventually becoming the Prior, the head of the Friary. ‘Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven’ is the predella (bottom step) from an altarpiece made for the Friary. It’s one of five panels: the two immediately on either side depict Biblical saints, like Mary the mother of Jesus and St Peter; and saints of the early Church, including some of the early Popes; the outer two panels depict Dominican saints.

Reflection:

Before our reflection, let’s start by hearing part of the final two chapters from the book of Revelation. [Reading]

What do you imagine that heaven is going to be like? In his paintings decorating the altar of the Friary where he was a monk, Fra Angelico tries to capture something of what he imagines heaven to be like. He depicts heaven as a place focussed on worshipping Jesus, the lamb who was slain and who overcame death. Hence Jesus is shown at the centre, with glorious gold light streaming from him. He’s carrying a flag with a red cross, not because he wants to show that he’s supporting the English football team, but because it’s a symbol of having overcome death. And so the scar in his side, and on the palm of his hand are clearly visible.

Sam Wells writes: “For Christians, there’s only one thing greater than the overwhelming horror of death: and that’s the overwhelming glory of God. ... The Christian hope is that after death we come face to face with the wondrous power and love and passion of God, an experience we could liken to ... a dazzling light: and yet, because of Jesus, that overwhelming glory doesn’t destroy us, sinners that we are, but transforms us into the creatures God always destined us to be. After death we face neither the oblivion of physical disintegration nor the obliteration of spiritual destruction but the transformation of glorious resurrection.”¹

¹ Samuel Wells, ‘Speaking the Truth about Salvation’ from *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008)

Sam Wells identifies three central aspects about what heaven is like. The first aspect of heaven is worship. This is what Fra Angelico focusses on in his painting. Heaven is a place where humans and angels are together giving worship to God, singing God's praises, and making a joyful musical sound. And, as the book of Revelation makes clear, this worship is focussed on Jesus, the Lamb who was slain. This is "the Lamb who gave his life because God loved us too much to leave us to oblivion and obliteration; and the one whose resurrection gives us the life of heaven for which we long, and on which our hope depends."²

So heaven is a place where we humans, along with the angels, are lost in wonder, love and praise. Our worship of God is at the heart of what heaven is like. And Jesus is at the centre, at the heart of heaven: so there's no sun at the centre, for, as Revelation put it, "the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." This is what Fra Angelico seeks to capture in this glorious painting.

A second aspect of heaven is friendship. Jesus told his disciples that, "I don't call you servants any longer ... but I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15:15) Heaven is a place where we enter into that friendship, that intimacy which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have with one another. The distance is bridged between us as human beings, and between us and God. Fra Angelico's painting captures the sense of closeness between the worshippers – heaven is tightly packed, and not every face can be made out. But perhaps Fra Angelico misses the intimacy between us and Jesus, focussing more on the glory that exudes from Jesus.

A third aspect of heaven is feasting together. In the stories he told during his earthly ministry, this is the image that Jesus used most frequently to convey what heaven is like. It's a place where a big party, a great celebratory feast is going on. And it's why the Eucharist is at the centre of our worship life in the Church, because that's a foretaste of what we're going to be doing in heaven: we're going to be eating together at a banquet. But this isn't an aspect that Fra Angelico tries to incorporate in his painting: one picture can only tell so much.

A recent BBC TV series, 'Versailles', tells the story of how the French King, Louis XIV, transformed 17th Century France from a country of warring nobles with their own fiefdoms, into a unified nation state. He did it by building the massive palace of Versailles, and developing a cult around himself, as the Sun King, a god-like figure. The cult involved all the nobles of France living at his palace, and focussing on his every action. This included the privilege – for a lucky few each day – of seeing him rise from his bed in the morning, and being part of helping him to get dressed, in splendid and luxurious clothing. In his court at Versailles, Louis XIV, who became known as the Sun-King, provided a pale imitation of what the true Sun-King, Jesus, the Lamb of God, achieves in the court of heaven, the new Jerusalem.

² Wells, 'Speaking the Truth about Salvation'

As the book of Revelation reveals, what Jesus achieves is the unification of all the warring factions of the world, and the healing of all the nations. In heaven there will be no more violence or warring. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. All the tears of hurt will be wiped away from every eye. Death will be no more. Instead we will all be united in our worship of Jesus, the Lamb of God. We will all enjoy an intimacy with one another and with Jesus. And we will find ourselves eating and feasting together. Our deepest longings will be fulfilled. And, as Fra Angelico gives us a flavour of in his painting, we will be overwhelmed by the glory of God.

*Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
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**‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Session 22: The New Jerusalem**

A closing prayer (for the end of the session):

Glorious God, who has revealed your glory to us in your Son Jesus Christ;
inspire us to give all of ourselves in worship of you,
draw us deeper into our intimacy with you,
and bring us to that day when we can feast with you and all the saints
to the glory of your name, world without end.

Amen.