

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 8: The Birth of Jesus

Text: **Luke 1:26-38**

Image: **‘Mystic Nativity’**, Sandro Botticelli, 1500, NG1034

Reflection:

I’ve always thought that Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* has such an amazing energy. It is certainly unconventional. It’s like the vision of a three-tier universe. At the top are the angels of God, with the sky opening up to reveal the kingdom of heaven. In the centre is the stable and the holy family with an ox and ass looking on inquisitively. At the bottom of the painting, as men and angels embrace, little devils scatter and flee into holes in the ground. The painting is not simply a representation of the Gospel accounts of the nativity. Rather it’s a glimpse of the kingdom of God, the story of a birth that seems to unite both heaven and earth.

At the centre of this painting is a huge Christ child. He is at the centre of the dance – raising his head and right hand in blessing and his leg kicking out to touch the cloak of a truly massive Mary: if she stood up she would take the thatch off the roof! It’s as though Jesus is the centre of the dance. The vulnerable naked child gives life and joy to the whole universe. From his hand the dance spirals up through the vertical of the body of Mary into the circle of the dancing angels on the roof and then through the toes of the angels up into their wider circle lifting up in to the dome of heaven.

To the left with their long gowns are the Magi; and on the right, in their short hooded garments, the shepherds – drawn into the action by the angels. All are crowned with olive, the emblem of peace and the angels who dance carry olive branches. The scrolls of the angels pointing to the crib read “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” and the scrolls wound around the branches in the foreground combine with some of those held by the angels in the foreground to read: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth good will towards men”.

Botticelli seems to be uniting the Gospel: because from the nativity stories we’ve heard and the nativity plays we were perhaps involved in as children, we often see the nativity as one unified story. In fact each of the Gospel accounts are very different.

Mark the first Gospel writer does not include the birth of Jesus at all in his account. But he begins with the announcement so clearly reflected in this painting: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ Son of God.” Gospel is good news. Mark’s Gospel will begin with the message of John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus.

Luke is the Gospel writer who tells us, as we have just heard, about the census, Mary and Joseph going to be registered in Bethlehem, Jesus being wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn. It is Luke who tells us about the shepherds. Why this slant on the story. Well in many ways it is Mary's story that he tells. He will have a particular interest in the way the Gospel is revealed to the outsider, the sinner, the dispossessed. He is writing for the Gentiles.

Matthew will tell the story from the point of view of Joseph. And he will be the only gospel writer to narrate the story of the magi from the east: their reading of the signs and the failure of those in Jerusalem to recognise the Messiah for whom they have been waiting. Indeed the Messiah for Herod is a threat and we are deliberately reminded by Matthew of the parallel with Moses and the persecution of the children of Israel. Matthew is particularly concerned to point out how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

But also present in the Botticelli's picture, is the vision of the fourth Gospel writer: a wider vision, and a higher Christology. That Jesus is not simply God's child. He is "the Word made flesh" who lives among us. This is the one who is the "I am," the source of all life – the very source of the dance: everything that is, comes from him, all things belong to him. Here we see the meaning of our Christian faith: not God in a distant land but a God made flesh, incarnating in the human flesh all that God is. And we are called to take part in this divine reciprocity, this gift, this unity. We too are called to become part of the action of God in the world, part of the circle, to take part in this dance from earth to heaven from heaven to earth. Only God could be so human only humanity could be so divine.

In addition, the painting seems to be hinting at Jesus' second coming and the Book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.'"

The puzzling Greek inscription at the top of the picture, begins thus: "I Sandro made this picture at the conclusion of the year 1500 in the troubles of Italy." The year 1500 was a troubled time. At the dawn of this new century, as at the dawn of our own new millennium, they feared the worse – even the end of the world. In this vision, Botticelli celebrates God with us and looks forward to the second coming in the hour of greatest need.

Reflection by Revd Richard Carter
Associate Vicar for Mission, St Martin-in-the-Fields



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Session 8: The Birth of Jesus

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

Blessed God, our heavenly Father, in the coming of your Son you brought heaven to earth and lifted earth to heaven.

Help us to learn from the devotion of Mary and Joseph so that we too may become bearers of your love.

Like the shepherds and the magi, grant that we might discover you as the one who announces peace on earth and good will towards all.

And help us to become part of the dance of all creation, the divine life.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 9: The Baptism of Jesus

Text: **Mark 1: 1-12**

Image: **‘The Baptism of Christ’; predella panel**, Giovanni di Paolo, 1454, NG5451

A note on the artist and painting:

Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia was born in about 1403 and died in 1482. He was an Italian painter, one of the most significant working in Siena during the 15th Century. He became a prolific painter and illustrator of manuscripts. Many of his works have an unusual dreamlike atmosphere. He is best known for his lively and picturesque narrative scenes, especially his predella panels, such as this one. (A predella is a long horizontal structure at the base or ‘foot’ of an altarpiece.) This painting is from a series depicting scenes from the life of John the Baptist.

Reflection:

This painting is from a series depicting scenes from the life of John the Baptist; but it helpfully captures that John is not the centre of the story – rather Jesus is. However, whilst Mark in his gospel initially gives a rousing introduction to Jesus, when Jesus actually appears it is low-key, even an anti-climax: he comes humbly, from a Nowhere-Town and is indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd. It’s unlike anything we might expect from the appearance of one so powerful, the Son of God. Our painter, Giovanni di Paolo, captures this humility, in depicting Jesus’ nakedness and vulnerability.

In his account, Mark does not tell us why Jesus comes to be baptised. Unlike in Matthew’s gospel, there’s no protest on John’s part that he is unworthy to baptise Jesus. Mark says nothing to address the theological problem of why Jesus, who is without sin, would submit to a baptism of repentance from sin. We are left to infer that this is part of Jesus’ identification with our humanity.

Mark’s focus is on what happens at Jesus’ baptism, part of which our painting tries to capture. There are three main elements. First there is the ripping open of the heavens: Jesus sees the heavens ‘torn apart’, as our translation puts it. This is a sign that God is acting in a dramatic way in history: the barriers between heaven and earth are being torn down; God is now in our midst and present with us in a new way.

Second, the Spirit of God comes down on Jesus in a dovelike manner – not as a dove, as our painting depicts it; the descent of power from heaven is quiet and gentle like a dove, not loud and forceful, with fanfares or canons. And like the hovering Spirit at the first creation, the Spirit comes as a sign that a new creation has begun. This time the Spirit hovers over a human being, not over a formless void, pointing to God's intention to transform humanity.¹

Third, a voice speaks to Jesus saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' This voice is a reminder that delight is at the heart of the Trinitarian relationship within God. As Sam Wells puts it: 'The persons of the Trinity take delight in one another, in one another's existence, diversity, activity and expression.'² However, this voice's words also connect with God's delight in Israel when Israel was obedient, and they thus point to Jesus as the agent of God's mission in the world. Further, 'My son' is a title for the Davidic kings of Israel, and it points to Jesus' fulfilment of the Messianic promises, and that he will be the one to rule over God's people. However, against the common expectations, Jesus comes not as a triumphant warrior king, but as one who will suffer for his people; and this suffering is emphasised throughout Mark's gospel, and captured in the vulnerability of the naked figure in our painting.

The baptism of Jesus is important for us as Christian disciples because it sets the pattern that we are called to follow. And as Sam Wells points out, baptism for Christian disciples embodies three distinct but overlapping processes.

First there is the act of stripping. For the Christian disciple this means removing everything that stands between us and the hands of our merciful God. The image connects with that of the Israelites standing on the shore of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army behind them. The sea they are about to enter will swallow up all that oppresses and all that separates them from God, just as the water of baptism does for the believer. The stripping itself is multi-layered: a stripping of the spirit, which is 'a confrontation with God's judgement and mercy'³; a stripping of the mind, which is 'a confrontation with God's desire to free us from slavery'⁴; and a stripping of the body, which is 'a confrontation with God's power in the face of death'.⁵ This stripping is thus an enactment of the process of dying.

Second there is the act of washing. This is a washing of new birth, and an enactment of resurrection. It connects closely with Jesus' experience of heaven opening, the Spirit descending, and being embraced in the Father's love. In addition, the washing includes the element of drowning, just as the Israelites' oppressors were drowned in the Red Sea. It thus 'anticipates God's final judgement on evil'.⁶ So there is a cleansing of that which does not belong in heaven, of what does not belong in God's presence.

¹ David Garland *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary*, p.48-49

² Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, p.132

³ Samuel Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.70

⁴ Samuel Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.70

⁵ Samuel Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.70

⁶ Samuel Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p.70

Third, there is the act of clothing, not captured in our painting. The apostle Paul talks about clothing ourselves with ‘compassion, humility, meekness and patience’ (Col. 3:12). This act of clothing is about ministry being bestowed on each new disciple, and is thus the focus for grasping a new calling, a new vocation. Just as Jesus’ baptism was the beginning of his public ministry in the world, so baptism for each of us is the beginning of our ministry as members of the church.

*Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
Assistant Curate, St Martin-in-the-Fields*



‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 9: The Baptism of Jesus

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

Father of all, who revealed your vulnerability in the birth and baptism of your Son Jesus Christ;

thank you that you offer us cleansing from sin through baptism into the death of Jesus;

wash us afresh with your Holy Spirit; and help us to fulfil our calling as Christ’s disciples, that we might be agents of your love in the world, this day and always.
Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Session 10: The Parables / Martha and Mary

Text: **Luke 10:25-42**

Image: **‘Christ in the House of Martha and Mary’**, Diego Velázquez,
probably 1618, NG1375

Reflection:

Diego Velázquez painted this scene around 1618, when he was working in Seville. It's influenced by Flemish paintings which included biblical scenes within contemporary, domestic ones. And here, in the background of a 17th century kitchen we can see ‘Christ in the House of Mary and Martha.’

Poor Martha! She is cooking for everyone, busy in the kitchen, missing out on the conversation, worrying about the meal... Actually Luke doesn't say this, only that Martha is ‘distracted by her many tasks.’ But having welcomed Jesus into her home it seems reasonable to assume that her tasks are, at least in part, related to offering him hospitality. Meanwhile Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him, not helping Martha. When Martha complains, Jesus rebukes her. *Mary* is in the right, while Martha is bringing her distress upon herself by not prioritising properly. It's Mary who has ‘chosen the better part.’

Jesus' rebuke seems harsh. After all, isn't Martha working for *him*? Isn't she behaving commendably? At the start of this chapter, Jesus sends out his followers to proclaim the Kingdom of God and cure the sick. He tells them to rely on the hospitality of strangers, eating what they are given and staying with whoever invites them. Hospitality is described here as something given and received between people who share in Christ's ‘peace.’

Next comes the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in which we learn that the true neighbour is the one who shows mercy to a stranger in trouble. The despised Samaritan is the hero because he cares for the wounded man, carries him to safety, and pays for his bed and board at an inn. Hospitality and hospital come from the same root. Offering hospitality, responding to need, sharing with others: these things are part of proclaiming the Kingdom and inheriting eternal life. Jesus encourages his followers to give freely, but also to receive. The exchange is good for both parties.

So why is Martha rebuked? Not for her hospitality, but for her lack of discernment. She hasn't realised that there is something even more important than hospitality when Jesus visits her house. Now that he is here, the priority is to be *with* him. Not out in the kitchen. Martha is 'distracted' by serving him, instead of listening to him. She is concerned with herself: Mary is not helping *her*.

There is always a tension between pull towards the active and the contemplative lives. We may incline towards activity or meditation, but both are important and there will always be times when we need to do the opposite. Martha has failed to see this. So the story of Mary and Martha is like a parable: it is a story of the everyday, it carries a lesson which we have to unpick, and we may not immediately like what it tells us.

Velázquez's painting expresses this parabolic quality through its two related scenes. In the foreground we see a young cook, using a pestle and mortar. To her left is a stunning still life of fish, eggs, garlic, and chilli. Beside her, an old woman is directing her attention towards a scene in the top right corner. Here we see Christ in the house of Mary and Martha, his hand raised as he rebukes Martha. Behind him another doorway opens out into somewhere beyond our sight.

But *what*, and *where*, is this scene? Are we looking through a serving hatch into the next room? Or, through an internal window? Is this a painting on the wall, set in a deep frame? Could it be a mirror, reflecting a scene which is actually in front of the figures? It's not clear.

The old lady's pointing finger mirrors Martha's pointing finger. It's a prophetic gesture and her age is appropriate for such a role. But if we are tempted to see the foreground figures as contemporary parallels of Martha and Mary, their ages have been confusingly reversed. It is the younger woman who is cooking, and the elder who points to Christ.

The still life in the foreground is painted with exceptional clarity. The fish look wet, the eggs hard and smooth, the mortar heavy. There's a solidity and realism here which grabs the attention. Food is something immediate, compelling, necessary. It has its own imperatives. Fish and eggs don't keep: they must be cooked and eaten. The tasks of the kitchen are not easy to set aside.

The young cook and her older companion are painted with looser brushwork. Their identities are slightly less defined. It's a little harder to know what – whom – we are looking at. And the scene of Mary and Martha with Christ is even more loosely painted. There's a suggestion of distance, both spatial and temporal. There are strong visual echoes between the two scenes, but no direct reflection. The women in the foreground are not simply a mirror image of Mary and Martha.

What do *they* make of Martha's frustration, Mary's choice, and Christ's rebuke? Does the young cook have a choice to make between action and contemplation? How much freedom to choose does a poor, working woman have? What of all the women (and men) whose grinding work keeps life turning. What is it like to be told that this labour is the lesser part? The story of Martha and Mary is not an easy one and perhaps it is best understood as a parable, as something which draws on everyday situations and extracts important lessons from them.

Mary's choice was a good one in the circumstances but perhaps it was easier for her to make the right choice. Martha invited Christ and, as a guest in her house, he was primarily her 'responsibility'. Nevertheless, she allowed herself to be 'distracted' by her tasks. She couldn't see the important thing. These tasks stand out clearly in the painting – the fish, the eggs, the immediate need to feed people – while the really important thing – being with the teacher and listening to him – fades into the blurred background.

Reflection by Dr Chloë Reddaway

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**‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Session 10: The Parables / Martha and Mary**

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

Hospitable God,

who came to be with us in your Son Jesus Christ,

help us to see our need, above all else, to be with you and to listen you, like Mary,
that our lives might be ordered to reflect you at the centre.

We pray in Jesus’ name.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 11: Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Text: **Mark 11: 4-12 & 15-19**

Image: **‘Christ driving the Traders from the Temple’, El Greco,**
about.1600, NG1457

Reflection:

El Greco, which means ‘The Greek’, was born in Crete, which was then a Venetian possession. He “was trained as an icon painter ... before he set about transforming himself into a disciple of Titian and an avid student of Tintoretto, Veronese, and Jacopo Bassano.”

He “moved to Venice in 1567, where he developed his intense, colourful Mannerist style.” “He was in Rome in 1570 and studied the work of Michelangelo and Raphael.” “By 1577 he had settled in Toledo, Spain, where he lived the rest of his life, executing mostly pictures for local religious foundations.” His art made a “radical assault on expected ways of depicting the body in space.” “He made elongated, twisting forms, radical foreshortening, and unreal colours the very basis of his art ... [and] made these effects deeply expressive”.

In the face of the Protestant Reformation, “the Catholic church sought to reform its practices and reinforce belief in its doctrines. Spain put its vast resources ... at the service of the church, and Toledo, because it was the seat of the archbishop, played an active role. The Council of Trent, which met in the mid-sixteenth century to clarify Counter-Reformation goals, explicitly recognized the importance of religious art. El Greco, whose patrons were primarily learned churchmen, responded with intelligent and expressive presentations of traditional and newly affirmed Catholic beliefs.” “In the 16th century the subject of [this painting] the Purification of the Temple was used as a symbol of the Church’s need to cleanse itself both through the condemnation of heresy and through internal reform.”

“The most influential mystics of the Counter-Reformation were Spanish: Saint Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross and [Ignatius of] Loyola.” Teresa and John both worked “for the reform of the Carmelite order to bring it back to its primitive roots.” They transmit “to us profound spiritual experience; experience that is shaped by the Word made flesh, the self-emptying of Christ on the cross and his exaltation in resurrection.” They draw on a mystical theology exploring “that hidden state of experiencing God without images or concepts.”

“El Greco’s heightened experience in his paintings makes you wonder if he, too, underwent ... [similar] contacts with the divine.” “The personality [or emotion] of El Greco’s painting is [ultimately] what is irreducible about it ... but is the energy that shudders through it love, or anger?” Let’s think about that question in relation to this painting?

“In the time of Christ, the porch of the Temple in Jerusalem accommodated a market for buying sacrificial animals and changing money. Christ drove out the traders, saying, ‘It is written “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you make it a den of thieves.’ (Matthew 20). This episode is known as the Purification of the Temple.”

“Passover meant big business for Jerusalem-based merchants ... Since it was impractical for those traveling from distant lands to bring their own animals, the merchants sold them the animals required for the sacrifices—at greatly inflated prices. The money changers also provided a necessary service. Every Jewish male twenty years of age or older had to pay the annual temple tax (Ex. 30:13–14; Matt. 17:24–27). But it could be paid only using Jewish or Tyrian coins ... so foreigners had to exchange their money for acceptable coinage. Because they had a monopoly on the market, the money changers charged an exorbitant fee for their services (as high as 12.5 percent). [F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 74].

“Watching in amazement as their Master dispersed the temple merchants, His disciples remembered that it was written in Psalm 69:9, “Zeal for Your house will consume me.” Jesus’ resolute passion and unwavering fervor was clear to all who saw Him. His righteous indignation, stemming from an absolute commitment to God’s holiness, revealed His true nature as the Judge of all the earth (cf. Gen. 18:25; Heb. 9:27).” (The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel [Reprint; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998], 207)

In the picture, “The scourging figure of Christ stands exactly centre stage. The merchants and traders have been placed to the left, a group of Apostles to the right. A crowd divided [like this] into good and evil halves is liable to bring the Last Judgement to mind. Two stone bas-reliefs in the background reinforce the association of the traders with sin and the Apostles with redemption. The relief above the traders shows the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise, while the one above the Apostles shows the Sacrifice of Isaac, traditionally understood as a prefiguration of Christ’s own redemptive sacrifice on the Cross.”

“The figure of Christ ... resembles a flame, and perhaps the painting as a whole should be understood in the light of mystical experience – not as a depiction of a physical act, but as an image of a spiritual state, the culmination of prayer and meditation, when the radiance of Christ suddenly floods in on the individual at the moment of illumination.” In the words of St John of the Cross, as “The Living Flame of Love.”

So we have a painting in which elongated, twisting forms, foreshortening and unreal colours are deeply expressive of energies and emotions which inform the fiery expression or reform of the faith, in both institutions and individuals. A painting which seems to depict prayer and meditation culminating in emotions and actions which seek to reform and renew but do so through judgement and punishment.

The painting and the story raise profound questions for us:

- Are love and anger separate emotions or can they be combined?
- Are love and anger primarily emotions or are they also shown in actions?
- Can loving actions include an element of violence?
- Should our passion for God and for the reform of the Church or society involve a degree of anger; in other words is a righteous form of anger possible?

The songwriter John Bell has described Jesus as “A Saviour without safety” who is “inspired by love and anger” in addressing injustice. His hymn wants us to be as “disturbed by need and pain.” Yet, living, as we do, in a time when religious extremism extends to acts of decapitation, we may worry that this kind of ‘righteous anger’ can easily lead to justifying the kind of atrocities perpetrated by ISIS or, through theories of ‘just wars’, to disproportionate or illegal military interventions by the West.

The painting and the story may not fully answer all these questions but they certainly bring them vividly to life. Passion is clearly expressed; but is it love or anger or both that is being shown? Discuss.

*Reflection by Revd Jonathan Evens
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Priest-in-Charge, St Stephen Walbrook*

With thoughts and ideas drawn from:

- Keith Christiansen http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grec/hd_grec.htm
- Jonathan Jones <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2004/jan/24/1>
- <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/el-greco-christ-driving-the-traders-from-the-temple>
- <https://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg29/gg29-over1.html>
- Lawrence S Cunningham <http://americamagazine.org/issue/558/article/st-john-cross-mystic-light>
- Andrew Graham-Dixon <http://www.andrewgrahamdixon.com/archive/readArticle/116>



‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Session 11: Jesus Cleanses the Temple

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

Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by need and pain,
Informed of God’s own bias we ask him once again:
“How long must some folk suffer? How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self-interest turn prayer and pity blind?”
God asks, “Who will go for me? Who will extend my reach?
And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?”
May we answer, “Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.”
Amen

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 12: The Last Supper

Text: **Mark 11: 4-12 & 15-19**

Image: **Christ washing the Feet of the Disciples**, Jacopo Tintoretto,
about.1575-80, NG1130

A note on the artist and painting:

Jacopo Tintoretto, c. 1518–1594, lived and worked for most of his life in Venice. After Titian’s death, he became one of the leading painters in the city, controlling a large workshop. Among others, he designed and worked on a number of commissions for the Doge’s Palace. Tintoretto’s art is characterised by daring inventiveness in both handling and composition. Most of his paintings are large-scale narratives on canvas, animated by dramatic lighting and gestures. He was deeply influenced by Titian; he wanted to combine Titian’s use of colour with the energised forms of Michelangelo. Tintoretto is usually described as a Mannerist, although his striving for effect is less in the cause of stylishness and more for the sake of narrative drama. Parts of this painting, originally painted for a church chapel, are badly worn.

Reflection:

Before our reflection, let’s start by hearing the story from John’s gospel.
[Reading of John 13:1-17.]

This painting depicts part of this story from John’s gospel. It’s clearly an important story because in John’s account of the last supper, this is the central action, and there is no account of the breaking of bread and the institution of the Eucharist. Instead, John gives us this story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. Tintoretto captures the dramatic moment when Peter initially refuses to have his feet washed. The story is a particular favourite of Tintoretto, who painted six different versions of it. One of the distinctive features of this one, is that it’s more intimate, set in a more obviously domestic setting, including the nice touch of the dog curled up in front of the fire. This seems in keeping with an act which is distinctly intimate, that of washing someone’s feet.

How do you feel about washing someone else’s feet? I wonder how you’d have responded if instead of our usual small group discussion, I’d invited you to wash one another’s feet? My own experience of foot-washing in the Christian church has been hugely positive: for many years I was a member of a congregation where foot-washing was done once every three months at an evening communion meal. Unfailingly it was a moving and humbling experience of working out what it meant to be community together. But for many of us, we identify with Peter’s initial reaction to the idea: ‘No way, thank you.’

How are we to understand this story? Sam Wells' helpfully suggests that it is an enactment of the incarnation.⁷ In such a reading, the table is seen as representing heaven, the outer robe which Jesus sheds represents letting go of the trappings of divinity, and the towel represents the human nature that Jesus takes on in the incarnation. Jesus' ministry is represented by the foot-washing, and there's also teaching, prophecy, questioning, command, controversy and confrontation, all features of the gospel story. Then Jesus' resumption of his place at the table represents his exaltation at the right hand of the Father in heaven. What we've got then, is the gospel in miniature.

If we remember the context of this story, coming after the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with nard, and wiping his feet with her hair, as an act of preparation for his death, we can see that this is a story about Jesus preparing his disciples – preparing us – for death. Unless we're willing to die with Jesus, we can't expect to share in his resurrection: that's what Jesus tells Peter. Peter's response that he wants Jesus to wash his hands and head also draws out that there is an important distinction between foot-washing and baptism. Baptism is a once-only action that prepares us for life – hence 'one who has bathed does not need to wash'. But while we only need baptism once, we need regular cleansing from the sin that accumulates in our lives – hence we need foot-washing regularly. Yes, we need Jesus to wash our feet; but we're also commanded by him to wash one another's feet. Sam Wells calls this getting into the habit of preparing one another for death.

For if we are really to follow Jesus, if we are to be his real disciples, then we too shall have to endure the cross, just as he did. This may not mean literally having to face martyrdom, as some have had to endure. It may mean being humiliated or ridiculed for our faith. It may mean missing out on promotion, or even losing a job. It may mean restrictions on what we can say, or how our children are educated. This isn't an attractive road. But part of the strength for the journey will come from being part of a community where we wash one another's feet. Where we show practical love for one another. Where we bear with one another, and challenge one another. Where we give our lives for one another. Where we wash one another's feet.

While this is about truly serving one another, it's not about denying our power. As John reminds us, in Jesus' case he washes his disciples' feet 'knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God'. Jesus knew the power he had; but he chose to use that power in an unexpected way. So this indicates that the call is not to become grovelling worms; but mindful of the power we do have, to use that power in the service of others.

This all suggests a level of intimacy with one another, and a pattern of exposure to one another and to God that can seem deeply uncomfortable in our individualised, consumerist culture. This uncomfortableness is what Peter expresses for us in the gospel story. We'd like it to be another way, not this way. It's this moment of protest which Tintoretto captures in this painting.

⁷ Samuel Wells, *God's Companions* (Blackwell, 2006), p.216

And perhaps this uncomfortableness around physical foot-washing is one reason why most churches practice it so little, despite Jesus' clear injunction to do so, and despite his clear promise of blessing when we do so. What will it take for us to re-engage with the practice of foot-washing in our church?

*Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
Assistant Curate, St Martin-in-the-Fields*



‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 12: The Last Supper

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

Father of all, who revealed your humility in the incarnation and ministry of your Son Jesus Christ;

grant that we might learn to wash one another’s feet, by showing practical love for one another, by bearing with one another, and by challenging one another.

Fill us afresh with the spirit of Jesus.

Amen.

**‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Session 13: Gethsemane**

Text: **Matthew 26: 36-54**

Image: **‘The Agony in the Garden’** by Giovanni Bellini, about.1465, NG726

A note on the artist:

Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516) was probably the best known of the Bellini family of Venetian Renaissance painters. His father Jacopo, his brother Gentile, and his brother-in-law Andrea Mantegna were all significant painters. A few years earlier Mantegna painted a similar painting of Gethsemane, also in the National. Bellini lived and worked in Venice all his life; his career spanned 65 years, and he was still painting in his 80s. Giovanni revolutionized Venetian painting, moving it towards a more sensuous and colouristic style. He is celebrated for his pioneering portrayal of natural light, seen in such works as ‘The Agony in the Garden’, and also for his tender and graceful pictures of the Virgin, and for his altarpieces. He had a great effect on the Venetian painting school, especially on his pupils, who included Titian.

Reflection:

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

This painting depicts the first part of this story of the events in the garden of Gethsemane. More than anything the story of Gethsemane teaches us about Jesus’ full humanity.⁸ We see his humanity in his need for companionship during this time of trial – he takes the same three disciples with him whom he took onto the mountain to witness his transfiguration, which testified to his deity; he wants them present with him here in the depths of his humanity.

Jesus’ humanity is perhaps most markedly seen in his emotional turmoil at the prospect of his death, a turmoil that should properly be translated as ‘depressed and confused’ – stronger than the ‘grieved and agitated’ of our NRSV translation. Jesus was facing the full extent of the horror that he was about to endure, and the prospect was surely depressing: he is emotionally crushed. As the writer to the Hebrews expresses it: ‘For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.’ (Heb 4:15). The fear of death marks us out as humans, and here in Gethsemane we see Jesus plumbing the depths of our humanity as he faces his imminent death.

⁸ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-38*, p.648

This story also speaks to us of Jesus' free obedience. Again as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, 'Jesus *learned* obedience' (Heb 5:8). Obedience didn't come naturally or easily just because Jesus was God's Son: it was a struggle to commit himself to what God wanted – hence the three stages to his pleading with God. And so we shouldn't be surprised if we too can find it difficult to be obedient to what God wants of us.

Matthew records that Jesus 'threw himself on the ground'; but a more accurate translation might be that he 'fell flat on his face'. This posture reflects both his desperation and his humility; and we note that Bellini doesn't really do justice to this aspect of story: he has Jesus kneeling at what looks somewhat like a pew made out of rock and earth – which isn't entirely silly given that Jesus is praying.

Jesus' prayer at this point is completely consonant with how he has taught the disciples to pray early in his ministry: 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.' It's an intimate appeal to God his Father; it's a plea for this trial to be taken away, if that were possible; and it's an affirmation that, more than anything else, Jesus wants to do what his Father wants, rather than being dictated to by his own human desire.

This is not just a story about Jesus' humanity, but also about the weaknesses and failures of our own humanity. First, there is the failure of Jesus' three closest followers to be able to stay awake and pray, as he asks them to do. This is delightfully depicted by Bellini, with Peter, James and John in three different but equally somnolent postures. Like them, we too can abandon Jesus in his hour of need. We are reminded that it *does* matter to God that we are faithful in prayer. Second, there is the betrayal of Jesus by one of his other followers, Judas, whom Bellini depicts as a rather overweight figure at the head of the mob of soldiers and guards coming to arrest Jesus. This reminds us of our complicity in trying to force God's hand, or have God do things our way.

Third, but not captured in Bellini's painting, is our tendency to resort to violence when things don't go our way. Although Matthew doesn't name him, in his gospel John fingers Peter as the one who draws a sword, and cuts off the high priest's servant's ear. But Jesus' rebuke is unambiguous: 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.' It's a powerful statement – in keeping with all that he's taught in the Sermon on the Mount – that such violent methods are not part of Jesus' way of working. And to reinforce the point, Jesus points out that he could call on 'twelve legions of angels' if he wanted to. But, he affirms, that is not God's way of dealing with the situation; that is not how God is going to save Jesus; nor how he's going to save us.

Finally, let us return to Giovanni Bellini's painting. One of its most noteworthy features is his treatment of the dawn light. It functions as a reminder that 'the dawn from on high will break upon us'. A new dawn is coming. This is Bellini's own twist to the Gethsemane story: for the gospel accounts indicate that this scene happens at night, while darkness holds sway. Bellini's use of light in his beautiful dawn sky conveys a sense of hope and future promise.

Despite the failure of the sleeping disciples, despite the forthcoming betrayal and arrest, despite the cruel death on a cross that awaits Jesus, there is a sense in this painting that Christ's suffering will bring hope and salvation. In his humanity, Jesus is not overwhelmed by our human sin and failure; instead he entrusts himself into his Father's hands, and courageously drinks the cup that is set before him, and ushers in the new dawn of God's kingdom.

*Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay
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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’
Session 13: Gethsemane

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

Gracious God, whose Son Jesus Christ plumbed the depths of our humanity and yet was without sin;

strengthen us in our weakness, help us to stand firm in our confession of you and to remain faithful in prayer;

save us from the temptation to violence,

and renew us in our hope in you.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 14: The Trial of Jesus

Text: **Matthew 26:57-68**

Image: **‘Christ before the High Priest’**, Gerrit van Honthorst, about.1617, NG3679

A note on the artist and the painting:

This painting ‘*Christ before the High Priest*’ is by the Dutch Golden Age⁹ painter Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656) and was painted about 1617. Honthorst was born in Utrecht in the Netherlands the son of a decorative painter. He became one of the main Dutch followers of Caravaggio, whose style he popularised in Holland on his return from a stay in Rome, 1610-20. This is one of his most famous paintings and shows the powerful influence of Caravaggio. It is one of the most popular paintings in the National Gallery, and when the Gallery’s paintings were taken to Wales in 1939 at the outbreak of war, this is one that remained in London. The lit candle at the centre of this painting is its focus and the painting highlights the themes of light and dark in the scene from the gospel: impending darkness all around, Jesus in the centre, the light of the world.

Reflection:

The themes of light and dark are very much to the fore in our reading this week as we move on from the scene of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and the arrest, to Jesus’s trial before Caiaphas the high priest. There is a sense of darkness all around. Earlier in this chapter (v.3) we hear that the plans for Jesus’ arrest are already underway as the chief priests and elders ‘conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.’ In fact, much earlier we hear that they have already decided to destroy him, when he heals a man on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:14). Here they are fulfilling their plans. So we see in this painting there is darkness: shadowy figures, crowding around Jesus on trial. The forces of evil are all around as the events surrounding Jesus are moving him towards his Passion and the Cross. And in the midst of this darkness is the candle flame bringing light. And we find Jesus. The light of the world.

Jesus is lit up by the candle. His white outer robe reflects the light so he seems to reflect the light to the people around him. I think the painting reflects the scene of the trial, inviting us to decide whether we are in the place of darkness or light. Are we in the crowd around, condemning, judging, where it is so easy to be invisible, not really feeling responsible for our actions, or do we come into the exposed place of light to be with Jesus in the place of judgement or condemnation?

⁹ The Dutch Golden Age was a period in Dutch history, roughly spanning the 17th century, in which Dutch trade, science, military, and art were among the most acclaimed in the world.

In our journey of Lent, we turn from a time of discipline and prayerfulness to Holy Week and the Cross: this is where it will matter where we place ourselves. In the confrontation with Caiaphas Jesus places himself totally in the place of light and truth. But we see here, and will see again as we journey to the cross, that it is a lonely place. I wonder if we're prepared to stand in the lonely place for the sake of the truth.

We can also think of this in our daily lives, about where we chose to stand in the light and where we chose to be in the shadows each day. A simple prayerful examen of the day can help you to reflect on that. Simply ask what drew you into the light: loving, truthful, actions and words. And also ask where you turned away. Maybe the invitation to you this Lent is to move further into the light, to be with Jesus. I wonder what that would cost you?

Opposite Jesus in the painting we find Caiaphas, seated. And in front of Caiaphas, on the table, the books of the Mosaic Law are open. All the power of the religious authority is being brought to bear. Caiaphas has all the weight and authority in the scene, the two witnesses standing arms folded behind him in cowardly judgement. Caiaphas's finger is very prominent. He is accusing, judgmental.

My colleague Richard Carter tells an interesting story about this painting. He took the Spirituality Group from the Connection to see the painting in the National Gallery and this group of homeless people focused a lot on the pointing finger. "If you are homeless you get pointed at and accused all the time," they said, "You're always in a place of judgement." And then, as if to prove the point, one of the attendants in the gallery came over, because he thought they were all standing too close to the painting, and wagging his finger at them, he told them to move further back. Apparently they all laughed! This accusing finger is exactly what they had been talking about.

Facing the accusing finger in this painting, we move across to Jesus' face. He carries an incredible expression. It's a truly loving gaze. It's as if Jesus is absorbing all the angry intent and hatred and darkness all around, taking it in and instead of fighting back, or defending his position, he simply stands there, his whole posture open and undefended. There is a great sense of stillness about Jesus. He silently responds. His look is utterly loving because it is so truthful. It's as if he's saying: 'I can see who you are,' and 'I know the truth.'

Christ stands bound and accused and yet he is the one who is totally free. He absorbs the hatred and still gives out love. There's no hatred in his look: rather, it is generous and loving. Because, as we will hear when he speaks, he knows he is the one that has come to bring light and truth into the world, to be the light of the world, and to confront the darkness.

I wonder who in our world today is in that place, looking back with love and attention? How does our Christian faith help us when we are tempted to fight our corner? What is it that keeps us steady and focused and centred?

In this confrontation with Caiaphas where does authority really lie? When Caiaphas accuses Jesus, Jesus remains silent. Matthew, in his gospel, depicts Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied: 'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.' (Isaiah 53:7)

Jesus' silence condemns the judge and the witnesses; and by his silence he refuses to accept the authority of the trial. In the face of this onslaught from the religious hierarchy Jesus is the one with real authority.

When Jesus does answer, he answers on his own terms, using the term 'Son of Man' to describe himself, a term he has used throughout this gospel. Jesus is seemingly powerless before Caiaphas but he claims to be all-powerful. The light around Jesus, his expression and his whole physical posture work to present Jesus as the centre of this painting, the light of the world. But this self-identification as the Messiah, the Son of Man, is considered blasphemous and it becomes the grounds for the verdict against him.

And so the crowd all fall in and condemn him to death. It reminds me of the scene in John where Jesus asks those gathered to stone the woman caught in adultery who would throw the first stone. In that situation, instead of allowing the members of the crowd to remain anonymous, he invites them to step out and identify themselves. It is a challenging way to bring them out into the light, a challenge to take responsibility for their own actions. Here the group respond with one voice: 'He deserves death.' We feel the full force of the group against him. This is seen in their violence towards him, spitting in his face and striking him. Again we have resonances of Isaiah's Suffering Servant as Jesus doesn't retaliate: 'I did not hide my face from insults and spitting.' (Isaiah 50:6).

In the earlier scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus reprimands the disciple who draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest. Here Jesus is living out his chosen path of non-violence, so that the scripture can be fulfilled. Ironically, Caiaphas has scripture open in front of him and he is using it to defend his murderous intent. This offers a warning to us to look around us and see where the World of God is truly alive and present. Jesus is the living embodiment of scripture. The word of God is standing before Caiaphas and he doesn't recognise it.

In conclusion, I wonder how we take the word of God and live it. And I wonder where we chose to stand. In the place of the shadows? Or with the light of the world – however costly that might be?

*Reflection by Revd Katherine Hedderly
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‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 14: The Trial of Jesus

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

Lord Jesus, you are the Light of the World;

as we journey through the coming week, guide us in all that we do to choose the light; and show us where we are to witness to your truth.

When we feel ourselves to be wrongly accused, strengthen us.

Remind us of the authority of our silence and the power of our words, if spoken in love.

And be with all today who are in a place of darkness because of the actions of others: bring them the light of your freedom and peace.

Amen.

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 15: The Cross

Text: Luke 23:26-38

Image: ‘Christ carrying the Cross’, Italian, Venetian, about. 1500, NG6655

A note on the artist and the painting:

This is a new acquisition by the National Gallery, presented in 2015. It’s a small painting, about 500 years old, painted on wood. We do not know who the artist was. The painting is attributed to Giovanni Bellini’s workshop and is the first Venetian version of this composition known in the UK. It would have been created as a private devotional work, an aid for prayer and contemplation. The composition derives from Bellini, who is celebrated for his pioneering portrayal of natural light. Yet, the artist who painted this one – whilst under Bellini’s influence – has stamped his individuality on a subject much painted by the master and his pupils. (There are around 65 known variants of this composition by Bellini and members of his workshop.) The depiction of Christ’s face, shown with his cross on the way to Calvary, was very popular in Northern Italian painting in the last quarter of the 15th century.

Reflection:

Before our reflection, let’s hear the story from the gospel of Luke. [Reading]

The cross is the central symbol of the Christian faith. It represents the crisis point of the Gospel narratives, the paradox of the apparent failure of Jesus’s mission which proved in the end to be the gateway to the new life of the Kingdom he had promised. Theologians have written volume upon volume about the significance of the cross for the Christian faith and for humanity. And different parts of the worldwide Church continue to emphasise different aspects of its meaning. Reflecting on the enormity of the events leading up to Jesus’ death on the cross at Calvary is a humbling task. Let us begin by looking at the painting itself.

The first thing I noticed about this painting is that, while many portrayals of the crucifixion have many characters in them, this one is a small close-up: it depicts Jesus alone. The note beside the painting in the National Gallery helpfully observes that ‘the viewer occupies the position of the Holy Women who looked on as Christ passed by.’ What did they see?

The next thing one notices, perhaps, is that it’s a strikingly human face, that of an ordinary young man. The eyes are set wide apart, with a slight squint. He is the sort of person you might work or study with, or meet at church or pass in the street. There is realism in the detail; it is not stylised.

Look at the curls of his hair against the white of his garment. The light falls on his face and below it, emphasising the brightness of the cloth. And look at his face. There's a deep sadness in it, and a puzzlement and a disappointment. The eyes are red, as though he has been crying.

To our modern vision the crown of thorns looks remarkably like barbed wire. There has been brutality, human brutality to another human being. The blood drawn by the thorns is vivid, real.

But there is a resolve in the face too. After the agony of the Garden, after the sweat like drops of blood, there is Christ's momentous conclusion: 'Not what I want, but what you want.'

If we look longer, we find that there is a strange peace about the face. And a love in it. We sense, I think, that we are looking at the human face of God.

I said earlier that the painting is of Christ alone. Yet we know from the text that he was surrounded by people, and no doubt animals and obstacles and all the bustle of life in Roman occupied Jerusalem. I was privileged to visit it last year, and walked a small part of the Via Dolorosa. The position of the buildings hasn't changed. It is chaotic, noisy, dirty, and I found it incredibly moving. One could almost imagine a little scrummage of a procession going by, a condemned man on the way to being executed, with guards, curious onlookers and people going about their lives for whom this was just an annoyance. Yet, for those who loved Jesus, all they would have seen was his face, with its puzzlement, its disappointment, and its resolve. 'Not what I want, but what you want.'

Pairing the painting with the text was, I found, not altogether simple. The first and obvious thing is that in the painting Jesus is carrying the cross, whereas the text says that Simon of Cyrene was made to do it. In his commentary on Luke, George Caird indicates that Simon would have been pressed into service by the Roman army to carry, not the whole cross, which would have been too much for any one man, but part of it. Caird adds that the women were, in a macabre way, anticipating the end by beginning the conventional funeral rites and raising the death wail. Jesus credits them with genuine sympathy but warns them to keep their pity for themselves and their children.

In the horrors coming upon Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, shortly before many scholars think that Luke's Gospel was written, barrenness will paradoxically be a blessing for those caught up in the maelstrom of violence – those who have no children will not have to see them suffer.

The metaphor involving trees is an echo of Old Testament passages in Isaiah (10:16-19) and Ezekiel (20:47) where a nation's manpower is compared to a great forest, soon to be consumed by the forest fire of the divine judgment. Israel's intransigence has already kindled the flames of Roman impatience, and if the fire is now hot enough to destroy one whom Roman justice has pronounced innocent, what will happen to the guilty?

In the crucifixion narrative, there are echoes of Psalm 22, in the parting of the clothes and the scoffing, and of Psalm 69, in the offer of vinegar. For me, the comments of the crowd watching Jesus on the cross are a reminder of a beautiful passage near the end of a book by Michael Mayne, the former Dean of Westminster, entitled *Pray, Love, Remember*. (If anyone asks you what it means to be an Anglican, they could do worse than read it.) In his reflection on the crucifixion, Mayne writes that there were probably some in the crowd watching Jesus on the cross who challenged him, if he were the King of the Jews, to reign from there. He points out that the fact that, two thousand years later, he is writing the book and we are reading it, means that that is exactly what Christ does.

In conclusion, let's come back to the painting. After a while we become aware that Christ is not alone here. For we are looking at him, and he at us. We are about to be left when he dies. And the painting gently challenges us: what are we going to do about it when this is over? Are we going to allow this sort of brutality to prevail? Have we somehow colluded in what brought it about?

Christ stands on the brink of his Passion. And, on this Passion Sunday, so do we. What are we going to do about it?

Perhaps this is something of what the women saw, as Christ passed by, carrying the Cross on the road to Calvary.

I wonder what you see?

*Reflection by Revd James Johnston
Assistant Curate, St Matthew's Westminster*



‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Session 15: The Cross

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

Almighty God,

whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified;

Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find in it none other than the way of life and peace;

Through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.