

MOVING PICTURES

Meditations for Lent

Pictures by Caravaggio

Rt Revd Andrew John

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Introduction

Michaelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio has been described as the bad boy of the art world, its very own Mozart with no less a brilliance, an equal ability to offend and inspire and to create stunning pictures with the beautiful and the profane.

I can't remember where or when my own fascination with the artist began. I think I must have thought it rather sophisticated to know something about a rather strange world. 'Moving Pictures' is an attempt to express something of that hold and power that he has exercised over me since that time.

Each picture is accompanied with a meditation which tries to relate the Sunday readings and the painting's themes together. I have followed the readings for 1984 Church in Wales Holy Eucharist although the inclusion of the Bible chapter and verses means this is not an essential requirement.

This is of course a Lent Book. I hope it will open up new horizons for those who brave reading it. I think I wrote it for fun and also for God, a sort of 'thank you for saving me'. If the pictures and meditations move you to prayer and stronger desire for Christ, as they did me, then nothing more need be said.

Rt Rev Andy John, Bishop of Bangor

How to use this Book

‘Moving Pictures’ is designed for use throughout Lent. It is a devotional book intended to deepen thinking and prayer and stimulate new and fresh ways of understanding important events in the life of Jesus.

The book is divided into seven sections beginning with the first week of Lent and concluding with material for Easter week. The paintings, which are the backbone of the book, are by the artist popularly known as Caravaggio, who painted in Italy mostly in the seventeenth century. These are accompanied by the relevant story or Bible event. The book begins, day 1, with an opportunity to meditate on the chosen story or event (for example, the Calling of St Matthew, Matthew 9:9 – 13) and to reflect on some questions. The painting offers a visual dimension to this reflection in day 2 and, with some commentary, offers new possibilities through the creativity of the artist. Day three broadens the event to a *theme* explored through some more readings. The fourth day attempts to gather these thoughts together with an eye of the painting and story. The fifth day is an opportunity for the reader to describe how they have responded to their reading.

The scheme is easily used as a personal devotional aid covering the inside of the particular week but would also work for smaller groups who may like to combine several of the days into one meeting.

About the Artist

Michaelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born in 1571 possibly on the feast of St Michael the Archangel (September 29). He was the eldest son of Lucia Aratori and Fermo Merisi. Although his birthplace cannot be established with certainty, it is likely to have been in Milan even if his name is derived from the name of the town which was the family home some 20 miles from the city. This would be home with his two brothers and younger sister for many years and the place in which he would discover his love for painting and develop his basic skills.

The world into which Caravaggio was born was quite different from our own. Italy consisted of kingdoms ruled by competing sovereigns and emperors. Famines, wars and plagues added to a sense of change and uncertainty. In religious terms, the supremacy of the papacy had been reasserted through the counter reformation and brought new impetus to the world of sculpture and art. This in turn had opened possibilities for young aspiring artists. The influence of the great painters of the High Renaissance period such as Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci had given way to new modes of depicting the sacred. When Caravaggio accepted an apprenticeship at the age of 13 from Simone Peterzano, he was to embark on a career that was no less turbulent than the world into which he was born.

In 1592 Caravaggio moved to Rome and the centre of the religious and political world. Possibly through the office of his uncle, a local priest, he was employed in several studios including that of the city's leading artist, Giuseppe Cesari. He now had a base and position from which he could draw on his early influences to forge new and dramatic ways of expressing figures and themes. It was in Rome, for example, that Caravaggio developed his technique of drawing straight onto canvas, of using light and dark to create moods and emphases within his works and of exploiting the still life to create a near photographic quality which was radically different from the static and idealised figures of his contemporaries. One of the artist's most distinctive traits would be his frequent inclusion of himself in his works, most dramatically in 'David with the head of Goliath' where the artist's drawn and severed head stares out dangling from the hand of his vanquisher. He would use the same device in 'The Betrayal of Christ' and also 'The Martyrdom of St Matthew'.

Caravaggio's personal life has been the subject of enormous speculation. What is clear is that he was quick to belittle those who differed from his own stylistic approach. His frequent squabbles would erupt into violence, either verbal or literal and he was arrested on several occasions for his misbehaviour. While his time in Rome was his most successful it was also the most troubled. In 1606 he fled the city, never to return, having killed a man following a tennis dispute and became a fugitive settling eventually in Naples. The hope of a papal pardon led the artist to Malta where he procured the honour of the Knight of Grace in the Order of Malta. The Grand Master of the Order was a person of some influence and Caravaggio's 'elevation' was undoubtedly in pursuance of the greater goal of securing a return to Rome. Sadly, when he insulted a fellow Knight he was arrested and imprisoned for some months. We don't know how he escaped but his last years were spent in Sicily and Naples as a fearful and troubled man. Although by no means an unproductive period of his life,

one of his biographers describes how he went to bed fully clothed should a quick escape be necessary and also with a dagger. Caravaggio was by now a wearied and tired figure.

Following another violent encounter in Naples, Caravaggio set out for Rome in 1610 in a last attempt to procure his pardon. The trip was a disaster when Caravaggio was again jailed following a short stop en route. The payment to secure his release and loss of the paintings to secure his pardon left him both stranded and destitute. His long journey to Porto Ercole was through malaria infested lands. By the time he arrived he was suffering from a fever and died on July 18th, legend has it, on the beach.

From a 21st century perspective, Caravaggio's influence has been enormous. However, like many great pioneers, his greatness was not fully recognized in his lifetime and further declined in the years immediately following his death. No doubt his tempestuous life has added a sense of the legendary to a career that was itself exceptional. His willingness to scandalise the civic and religious authorities, his breaking from the traditions of his time and a determination to let nature speak on its own terms combine to make him one of the most revolutionary artists of all time.

Despite the scandals, Caravaggio also displays a profound understanding of human weakness visualised most dramatically by the repeated inclusion of himself in his works, usually as a figure of culpability. With these insights he also created works of great spiritual depth and made the stories and events of the Scriptures come alive with astonishing realism. This is the point of contact for us and the reason, of course, why this book has been written.

CHAPTER 1

THE CALLING OF ST MATTHEW

Picture title: 'The Calling of St Matthew' which can be found through an online search on <http://www.google.com/>

The Calling of St Matthew

Matthew 9:9-13

Day 1 – Read and Reflect

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'.

Read the passage several times

Reflect

Try and imagine the sort of setting for this story. How do you respond to the brief and clipped descriptions?

Can you think who the modern day tax collectors and sinners might be? What do you think was happening in Matthew as he hears Jesus' words?

Can you sense any particular tone in the words of the Pharisees when they speak to the disciples?

How do you react to the idea that mercy is better than sacrifice?

Now focus on the painting. Have your reflections changed as a result?

The Calling of St Matthew

Day 2 – Reflections

Caravaggio painted 'The calling of St Matthew' during the period 1599-1600 when he was commissioned to produce a number of paintings for churches in Rome. The work would feature on a side wall with 'The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew' in the Contarelli Chapel which was founded to serve the needs of the local French clergy. The adoption by Cardinal Cointrel (his French name) of St Matthew as his personal patron saint meant that this was one of six Matthean works to feature in the chapel. The story of Matthew's call is well known but receives a particular treatment here by means of a device Caravaggio would use often to throw his central figures into the foreground. The contrast of light and darkness allows the gloom to act as a foil for the principal characters who stand out from the painting more starkly. In this instance however, it is not simply the contrast but the breaking in of the light at a particular angle to create that photographic moment with the main players frozen in mid-flow.

The scene Caravaggio depicts is well known. Three gospels recall the event. In what is hardly a piece of poetry, we are told of Jesus' call – 'Follow me'. It's a simple command which leads into a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. Both events, in reality, act as a backdrop or introduction to the famous saying 'I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners'. (Matthew 9:9–13, Mark 2:14–17, Luke 5:27–32). The story lends itself to further reflection because Matthew is also a collector of taxes. He is, crudely speaking, one of the bad guys, in a privileged position with possibilities for personal advancement with the authorities. Whether he benefited from corruption or not we will never know although it is perhaps assumed in the accusation of the Pharisees. All we know is that Jesus told him 'Follow me' and he did so. We know nothing of the reasons or processes that took place before and during this epiphany.

What does the painting describe therefore? The scene takes some liberties with the historical event. Gone is the market place and collectors booth and in their stead sit Matthew with his companions in a dull, enclosed den. The window above them and to their left offers little light (an interesting feature on which we will comment later). So enclosed, these well-heeled nobles appear rather grubby and sordid. Their only brightness is the splendid clothing and general attire (eg sword) which marks them out as wealthy individuals.

To the right, emerging from the darkness, drawing our attention away from the table, we see Jesus and a disciple. The 'Light of the World' is pointing a finger, not in accusation, but directly at Levi himself. The halo above him leaves us in no doubt that here is the Holy Son of God calling a sinner to new loyalty. If the nobles stand out as wealthy and successful, Jesus and the disciple strike a different note, more humbly attired.

The painting's central motif is clear: Jesus calls Matthew away from this corruption, the table, his life of gain and security. He must leave the dull world of materialism and the glory of coin and silver. The light of the *world* symbolised in the small

opening behind and to their left offers little real enlightenment. In truth it is only part of the dull opacity that is characteristic of the lives of all seated at the table. Matthew's own finger pointing in on himself is a masterpiece of theatre. It is the dramatic 'Who me?' Does Matthew hope the gaze of Holiness might flee? Or is this complete surprise or joy to be so singled out? We cannot say. We only have the element of surprise frozen on Matthew's face which opens up these possibilities for speculation for us.

The two young men imported from other paintings are closest to Jesus. But their demeanour is quite different from Matthew's. The nearest to us peers into the gloom perhaps glimpsing something in the distance, a shape, form or stirring which merits some investigation. But he remains in darkness, the Light of the World and His searching brightness has not fallen on him. He remains truly blind and in the dullness of his own world. The second young man is no better off reposing in a leisurely manner altogether uninterested in what is happening before him. If he can see, he neither cares nor is troubled by what this means. He may simply be like those who have eyes but see not.

At the far end of the table there are two almost comic characters. One is hoarding his gain, bent over with hands caressing his money. He has no idea what is happening around him, caught up in his own small world. His happiness lies all before him on the table and nothing, we may assume, will break in. The second figure is slightly stooping and draws his glasses closer to his eyes to catch a better view of what is on the table. He too, ridiculously, cannot see beyond the frames which are resting on the end of his nose.

The picture recalls a story whose themes are common in the Scriptures. Lent presents this claim (although in truth it is the call of Jesus) very clearly. We are called by Christ too, away from the dungeon of self-absorbed living. For Matthew this was the unattractive world of note and denarii with its small and confined view of existence. Our situation might be quite different from his but the call to follow is nonetheless identical and the challenge to respond undiminished.

Further reading

Day 3

Genesis 17:1–7
James 1:12–21
Matthew 4:1–11

These additional readings may help us deepen our thinking.

Genesis 17:1–17

In Genesis 17, we read that God called Abram to walk before him and to be blameless (Gen. 17:1). The unexpected intervention of God, after 99 years, is no less extraordinary than his call. Abram is no longer to be known as ‘exalted one’. He loses the status this name implies and becomes an alien, a homeless traveller instead. He loses the security of the life he has known for all these years. He is now defined in a new way, ‘father of many’. In short, he must lose the dignity of greatness to be the source of blessing for others.

James 1:12-21

In these verses, James draws a contrast between the evil deeds of people and the steadfast goodness of God. It is God’s purpose that we should belong to Him, a ‘... kind of firstfruits of all he created’ and not live a life that leads to death. Once more there is a radical and unequivocal call to lay aside the things which oppose God and to accept the implanted word which saves us. There is no picking and choosing to be done here.

Matthew 4:1-11

The gospel story marries the theme of denial with that of identity. Jesus, because he is the true Son Of God, does not worship the evil one. He will not use his powers to advance himself nor to test God. Supremely, we see here that the call to follow God is bound up with belonging to God.

Responding

Day 4

Our task this Lent is to hear again the call to follow. For Matthew this meant severing a link, leaving something behind. The call to follow Jesus wasn't a request to modify behaviour nor a piece of counsel. It was stark and held no caveats. Without the ceasing and leaving there could be no progress, no new loyalty, no new life. This is the crux of the matter for each of us. For although we may have already left many things and responded to Christ, that call is all consuming, unending and its power and weight, its loveliness and exposing strength need to remain before us. This is why Lent offers a possibility for a new start. It is the good news story of cross and resurrection, leaving and arriving, losing and gaining. And we are called to all of these things.

Lord we beseech thee grant thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil and with pure hearts and minds to follow thee, the only God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Collect for Lent I

Resolutions

Day 5

How have you responded to the painting and story over these 5 days?

Are there things you would like to do or change as a result of your thinking?

Write a short prayer expressing your feelings or response to what you have been thinking

What are the things that prevent you from responding more wholeheartedly to Christ?

CHAPTER 2

THE DENIAL OF ST PETER

Picture title: 'The Denial of Saint Peter' which can be found through an online search on <http://www.google.com/>

The Denial of St Peter

Matthew 26:69-75

Day 1 - Read and Reflect

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. You also were with Jesus of Galilee, she said.

But he denied it before them all. I don't know what you're talking about, he said.

Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.

He denied it again, with an oath: I don't know the man!

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.

Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, I don't know the man! Immediately a cock crowed.

Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: Before the cock crows, you will disown me three times. And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Read the passage several times

Reflect

Try and imagine the setting for this incident. What sort of emotions might Peter have experienced when confronted?

Why do you think Peter called down curses on himself?

Have there been occasions when you feel you have denied Christ?

Now look at the painting. Have your reflections on the incident changed as a result?

The Denial of St Peter

Day 2 – Reflections

In the latter years of Caravaggio's working, the human dimensions of Biblical themes become more pronounced. Almost certainly the artist's own situation was shaping and creating these themes and their treatment. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his painting of The Emmaus Supper. Two paintings exist, one of which is included here but the second, later work is notable for its darker and sober character. Caravaggio's own flight from the authorities and his own lack of hope flood the canvas as Jesus is set back from the frame almost receding into the gloom at least in comparison with the earlier work.

This same element is present in another of his later works, 'The denial of St Peter', completed between 1609-10, a period of particular difficulty and stress for the artist. The work majors on the theme of denial and the inner conflict of an apostle who appears fragile and brittle. His tilting gait, away from his accusers, displays his surprise, his shock and offence at the suggestion of association. There is the resentful gaze which the accused hopes will forcefully underline his innocence. Two hands turn in on themselves, doubling and emphasizing a rejection of the charge levelled at him. Ironically, it is these same laboured and exaggerated responses which point to his guilt. As a figure he makes a striking comparison with Jesus, himself accused by Rome and of course 'innocent' of the charges. One is guilty and rejects the charge, the other is innocent and says nothing. Peter's pained expression is the central motif here but placed to the right of the frame, his gestures only make sense when viewed next to the woman and guard for they are his accusers and elicit his denial.

The four gospels are united in their recording of Peter's denial, three times in all (Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, Luke 22:55-62, John 18:16-18). They describe the growing frustration as each question gnaws away at his position. Matthew and Mark describe the curses he calls down at the suggestion of any closeness to the Lord. This self-reviling works for Peter to create distance from Jesus. No-one would easily curse themselves and all that this involved. The culmination of this episode is the crowing of the cockerel at the time of the third denial. We are told Peter went outside and wept bitterly.

Peter's accusers play vital roles here. The servant girl, from the High Priest's staff, faces the same direction as Peter. Both are looking at the soldier whose forward movement emphasises the accusation. His right hand and finger are raised towards the saint but the light is behind him so that he speaks from the darkness, surely a symbolic and deliberate placement. The servant girl is half bathed in a cold and piercing light. She too raises a finger towards Peter but is turned towards the soldier either about to or having engaged in conversation about the identity of the man before them. This strong light captures the accusing eyes and, with her own and the soldier's closeness to Peter, deepens the sense of claustrophobia. As Peter is cornered by the accusations, he is surrounded too, physically by the bodies before him. The dark gloom behind him offers no obvious place for escape and holds him before his

tormentors – a ‘physical’ prison to match the mental and emotional captivity he has created for himself.

The painting is not an easy one upon which to reflect therefore. Not because the themes are hidden or unclear but because they are so powerful and even overbearing. The discomfort we feel is because they resonate strongly with our own sense of self - preservation. Occasions which expose these traits in us are never comforting. But they always create the possibility for change and for growth.

Further reading

Day 3

Exodus 3:1–2
Romans 7:21–8:4
Luke 11:14–26

These additional readings may help us deepen our thinking.

Exodus 3:1–12

Like Peter, there is something of the unexpected in the calling of Moses. The word of God is unequivocal and its demands are absolute. Moses is faced with an enormous task and pales at the prospect. Is it the fear of facing Pharaoh or a fear of rejection by his own people? Perhaps Moses feels his inadequacy or recognises his status? Whatever he may have felt, he expresses the sort of reluctance we will understand when called upon to operate outside our ability or experience. Moses' words, 'Who am I', is the response of one who looks at scenarios without God, who only knows human limitations.

Romans 7:21–8:4

Paul is dealing with some of the most basic experiences in this passage: the desire to do the right thing and the experience of doing quite the opposite. The dreadful and awful conflict this creates is summed up in his words 'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Choosing the right thing becomes possible for Christians through the Holy Spirit but creates too an obligation – not to do what comes most naturally but what is in keeping with Christ.

Luke 11:14–26

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees takes on a new dimension in this episode but the more dramatic feature is the short story of the wandering demon. The unchecked and uncontrolled interior of a human soul is an inviting prospect for a rather unwelcome guest. The point appears to be that destructive choices are more serious than simply the sum of their consequences: it is their damaging effect and the subsequent state of the perpetrator.

Responding

Day 4

Denial, deceit and lies are familiar human experiences. That they are common to us all does not diminish their seriousness or dilute their capacity to damage or destroy. This wretchedness is equally familiar to any who have promised to follow Jesus and barely made the first hurdle. We relate easily enough to Peter therefore and know, perhaps too well, the steps we take to protect ourselves in our own deceptions. That Caravaggio visualises for us the signs of disingenuousness, the gait of the guilty and the protest of innocence makes it easier to view ourselves shoulder to shoulder with Peter. The deceptions may not be the same nor too the disassociations but it would be easy either to excuse ourselves or to remain frozen, like the picture, in a perpetual state of denial. For Peter, there was restoration after the sweet bitterness of tears. Here too we need courage to acknowledge the darkness of our own souls. Not simply the mistakes and errors of judgement but the deliberate rejection of his will and the deliberate deceptions. There is a fallenness common to us all which seeks to justify sin, to minimize its seriousness and which delights in self-serving excuses. To come face to face with our own frail, fragile and brittle faith is a shocking, frightening and yet liberating experience. This is the point at which the soul is uncovered, the truth is revealed and our weakness laid bare to the healing wholeness of the Redeemer. Let us not turn to despair nor denial but honesty before God.

Almighty God, who sees that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves : keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts which may assault the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Collect for Lent 2

Resolutions

Day 5

How have you responded to the story and painting over these 5 days?

Are there things you would like to do or change in your life as a result of your thinking?

What are the things that prevent you from responding more wholeheartedly to Christ?

Write a short prayer expressing your feelings or response to what you have been thinking.

CHAPTER 3

THE PENITENT MAGDALEN

Picture title: 'The Penitent Magdalen' which can be found through an online search on <http://www.google.com/>

The Penitent Magdalen

Luke 7:36-50

Day 1 - Read and Reflect

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is— that she is a sinner.

Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, he said. Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?

Simon replied, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled. You have judged correctly, Jesus said.

Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.

You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven— for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.

Then Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven.

The other guests began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you; go in peace.

Read the passage several times

Reflect

Try and imagine the scene depicted here. Can you see anything wrong in the way Simon was thinking?

How do you think the woman might have responded to both Jesus' words and to Simon?

Can you think of occasions when you were able to express your love for Christ like Mary?

Have you ever responded like Simon?

Now focus on the painting. Have your reflections on Mary changed at all?

The Penitent Magdalen

Day 2 - Reflections

The Penitent Magdalen is one of Caravaggio's earliest religious paintings, completed in the years 1593-4. The portrait of Mary bears little resemblance to previous treatments of the Penitent – the setting is no longer a wilderness, Mary is no beautiful hermit wrestling with the deep issues of salvation. Gone are the philosopher's skull and her covered and brave nudity. Instead the long flowing locks are untouched, undressed and dishevelled.

Caravaggio employed in the Penitent the same device used in the 'Calling of Matthew', a single and directed shaft of light to create a sense of movement within the frame and to direct our attention to his key theme. But the brilliance of the Penitent lies not in the way the light falls on Mary but quite the opposite. Here it is the dawning of light, stretching out above and behind her. There is no piercing shaft bringing an instant moment of recognition and enlightenment. The night, at least for Mary, is not far gone and the day is only just dawning.

There is a strong literary tradition that the 'Penitent' is the Mary we know in the Scriptures who anointed Jesus at Simon's house. However, the association between the Magdalen from whom seven spirits were cast and who supported the first missionary journey and the Mary who anointed Jesus and kissed his feet (Luke 7:36–8:2) is, at best, only inferred. In the painting, the clear signs make the association quite explicit - the jar of oil sits to her right and the jewels lie strewn behind it. Mary herself is seated near the ground on a plain wooden chair, now modestly dressed with her arms half folded on her lap. Her poise suggests contrition and sadness. There is a quiet and gentle introspection about Mary who is captured, deep in her own thoughts.

How should we reflect on these things? We see the process of *change* in Mary – the things which so occupied her life and affections are now being discarded. If they retain their beauty and brilliance, they do so only for others. Placed on the floor, undone and put aside, they no longer have the same power and attraction. And these things are happening in Mary *even now*. She has not completed this journey or perhaps resolved and fully comprehended the experiences she is undergoing. The picture describes a point, somewhere on a journey whose end is not yet in sight. Her demeanour picks up this theme: the modesty of the chair, her unfurled, perhaps untouched hair and her unpretentious dress. She cradles an emptiness in her arms, albeit temporarily. And yet she now radiates a different kind of beauty. The childlike lowliness of her posture reflects a new lowliness of spirit.

Nowhere is this lowliness, this joining of sadness, joy and hope, better expressed than in that single but telling, lowly tear. As the light breaks in above her we see there is much more than guilt here. The dawning light of grace is making sense of the past but revealing its shallowness and emptiness. As eyes are being opened, something new and free is emerging in Mary's life.

Lowliness is not a virtue often commended among Christians today. For some it has negative or old fashioned connotations but it is born in us when we have a firm and real grasp of our failings and possess the joy of sins forgiven. It is a steady rejection of overconfidence in human nature but equally a refusal to accept the misery of failure. Lowliness becomes our 'inner clothing' when we fully see how dreadfully sinful we are and how entirely we are loved. It is this which is so beautifully captured in the Penitent Magdalen

Further Reading

Day 3

Deuteronomy 5:6–end

Acts 2:37–45

Luke 19:41–44

These additional readings may assist our thinking

Deuteronomy 5:6–end

The Ten Commandments are among the best known parts of the Old Testament but are widely misunderstood. They are not really general rules for a happy life but describe God's standards. They are the OT hallmarks of the Kingdom of God. In the context of our theme, they create the possibility for change, for repentance because, alongside God's laws, we see how desperate is our situation and how we fall short of his standards. Jeremiah's assessment was no less an indictment (Jer 17:9). The holiness of God and his laws are not matters on which we can negotiate; they stare us square in the face and expose our weaknesses and our sins.

Acts 2:37–44

The question the crowd asks Peter comes from a new perspective. We are told they were 'cut to the heart' and sought the apostle's direction. It would be easy to only see an element of human guilt here, perhaps the sort of thing which today might make us say 'I feel bad about something'. But their response surely goes deeper. The holiness and grace of God do not work in opposite directions. Here they combine to elicit a new faith and life, visualised in baptism, for all who responded to the good news.

Luke 19:41–44

The times when Jesus wept rank among the most striking of occasions in the gospels. Here, standing above Jerusalem, the Man of Sorrows weeps for the so-called city of peace. And the tears come because its inhabitants could not see (we assume a self imposed blindness) what would bring them true and lasting peace. What they had longed for across the years and fought to achieve, stood above them but they remained untouched and unmoved. The dignity of human choice creates this terrible possibility, namely that we may encounter the living God and yet remain far from Him. And when this happens today, with us, are there still tears in heaven?

Responding

Day 4

The dawning of Christ's light into our own lives is extraordinary. By this means, we too are brought low by the memory of our sins. Their nearness invites a similar lamentation and we are painfully aware how slowly and partly formed is a new aversion to sin. But the painting's theme offers something more: it is the gift of *tears*. The quiet, beautiful and penitential refrain (often associated with Advent) gives voice to this experience: 'Drop, drop slow tears and bathe those beautiful feet, which brought from heaven the news and prince of peace'. Like Mary, we are called by that holy and loving light. Here we will know the wretchedness of sin, its ugly damage in our lives and the sublime joy of forgiveness. This is all part of the extraordinary experience of Christ.

Can there be true holiness without tears and true forgiveness without lamentation? We cannot ask 'what shall we do?' if we have not first stopped and experienced the pain and the sadness of our acts that were the cause of his passion. Where can that True Light penetrate our souls, our minds and our lives more deeply and work a new contrition?

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Collect for Lent 3

Resolutions

Day 5

How have you responded to the story and paintings over these 5 days?

Are there things you would like to do or to change in your life as a result of your thinking?

What are the things which prevent you from responding more wholeheartedly to Christ?

Write a short prayer expressing your feelings or response to what you have been thinking

CHAPTER 4

THE SEVEN WORKS OF MERCY

Picture title: 'The Seven Works of Mercy' which can be found through an online search on <http://www.google.com/>

The Seven Works of Mercy

Matthew 25:31-46 Day 1 - Read and Reflect

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats

He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Read the passage several times

Reflect

From the reading, how do you respond to the attitude of those who unconsciously served others and those who only served themselves?

What does the passage say about the nature of faith in Christianity?

Now reflect on the painting. Have your reflections changed at all?

The Seven Works of Mercy

Day 2 - Reflections

The Seven Works of Mercy is perhaps Caravaggio's most complex painting. It was completed in the last year of his time in Rome, between 1606-07. Soon Caravaggio would be living under judicial sentence for murder and, in effect, in exile. The theme of the painting is decidedly counter-reformation and in the light of Caravaggio's own situation, may reflect the artist's own hope for redemption through good works.

The painting is a strange mix of Biblical character, Neapolitan society and traditional piety all fused within one frame based on the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. The themes are all familiar – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the poor, sheltering the needy, visiting the sick and those in gaol. The seventh charity, a common theme from the medieval period, was that of burying the dead. The painting avoids an overly simple and flat reading of good deeds by the large and central intrusion of the embracing angels slightly to the left of the frame. Swooping down and bathed in light, we see heaven's blessing, perhaps even generating, the good works seemingly taking place among the common folk of the time, all of whom are unaware that heaven's eyes behold them (an important part of the original parable, namely that *good* works are done unknowingly). Above the angels, the Madonna and Child watch passively. As a late insertion to the work and possibly at the request of the local confraternity whose church was dedicated to 'Our Lady of Mercy', it is quite possible that the heavenly onlookers play no significant role in the painting, save that of strengthening the connection between the acts described and the heavenly mandate for them. Alternatively, the bond of Mother and Child might be seen as a paradigm – the good deeds and the Christian disciple are to be as closely associated as Mary and our Lord. In this sense they provide a founding inspiration and example.

Caravaggio blends his contemporary figures with Biblical and saintly ones: we see Samson drinking deeply from the jawbone. Once renowned for his strength and physical feats, he is here more humbly portrayed and now in receipt of help, a pathetic spectacle of weakness and vulnerability. The wealthy figure in the centre is often thought to be St Martin ready to cut his own cloak to help the naked man to his left and beneath him. Shelter is given to the homeless unobtrusively as a pointing finger directs the traveller, we assume, to a safe haven. Although the painting is 'busy', Caravaggio succeeds in combining all the elements of the Biblical parable and the additional feat by 'doubling up'. The benevolent night visitor, for example, both feeds the hungry and visits those in prison. St Martin clothes the destitute and helps the sick man with his crutch at the bottom left hand corner. The seventh act is not strictly burying the dead but the act of caring for the deceased. In the dark hours of the night a safe lodge for the deceased is sought. The outcome of this request is not the point at issue here, it is rather the endeavour and act itself which commends itself. Part of the appeal of the 'Seven Works' lies in a blending of the heavenly with the earthly, the divine and the ordinary. This brings new significance and depth to the simple but stark themes. The most startling of all the encounters for example, the shocking image

of the woman giving succour to the prisoner, is not just an extraordinary act (which must have generated considerable consternation in Caravaggio's time) but a devotion to God as well as the needy.

There is a Christ-likeness here which is much more than simply good deeds. The painting is a description therefore of true Christian discipleship. The victorious Son of Man judges on the basis of unconsciously formed but real acts of service. It is these very acts that Christians are called to practice in their own lives.

Further Reading

Day 3

Jeremiah 31:1–6
Revelation 21:9–14
John 6:1–15

These additional readings may help to deepen our thinking

Jeremiah 31:1–6

These words from Jeremiah describe a new confidence celebrating a new future for God's people. Jeremiah declares that the misery of abandonment will be exchanged for a fruitful existence. This new period of blessing is helpful in our own understanding of the themes we are exploring because they show that fruitful work and service accompanies the grace of God. His blessings should not lead to a spiritual form of selfishness but to an energetic engagement with the creation.

Revelation 21:9–14

The revelation to St John contains some difficult passages to understand but this is not one of them. We have a beautiful and grand description of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem created from the finest elements. The transforming power of God is central to this picture because we know the church is often anything but glorious. We are deeply conscious of our failures and weakness. This change, still to come, reminds us that how the humble material of human life can be transformed by the God of Heaven and Earth. In this sense and to relate this to our own themes, we have here our inspiration and challenge because even our small efforts can, by God's grace assume a far greater significance than we might think and possess much more of heaven than our minds may conceive.

John 6:1–15

The same transforming and divine grace lies at the heart of this well known gospel story. But it is not the unconscious acts of disciples that highlights this theme but rather their ignorance. Jesus takes what is basic, necessary and everyday and uses these things to advance the Kingdom of God. Faith is always nurtured when we allow Christ to consecrate our limitations and to transform the menial into something much greater.

Responding

Day 4

In all of the themes we are presented with pictures of what Christian service involves. These things are at the heart of the Christian gospel, they describe vibrant discipleship and possess an eternal quality. St James reminds his own hearers that faith without deeds is dead (James 2:14f) but what is striking here is the *quality* of these actions, their selflessness. Feeding the hungry, caring for the weak are not simply virtues, they are constitutive of true faith and piety. This is what the Kingdom of God looks like. As we move through Lent and face challenges to our own indifference, we are faced with similar questions. How is our own faith described? Is there anything of the same-self emptying, unconsciously giving about us? If our own lives were depicted onto a canvas what would the images comprise?

Almighty Father, look upon thy family the church that refreshed and strengthened by thy grace, we may persevere in the way of salvation and find in thee our joy and our peace; through thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

Collect for Lent 4

Resolutions

Day 5

How have you responded to the reading and painting over these 5 days?

Are there things you would like to do or to change in your life as a result of your thinking?

What are the things which prevent you from responding more wholeheartedly to Christ?

Write a short prayer expressing your feelings or response to what you have been thinking

CHAPTER 5

THE BETRAYAL OF CHRIST

Picture title: 'The Betrayal of Christ' which can be found through an online search on <http://www.google.com/>

The Betrayal of Christ

Mark 14:43-52

Day 1 – Read and Reflect

Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard. Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, Rabbi, and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Am I leading a rebellion, said Jesus, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled. Then everyone deserted him and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

Read the passage several times

Reflect

Try and imagine the scene described in the reading. What kind of environment and atmosphere is conjured by the reading?

Why is the Betrayer's kiss thought to be so significant?

Can you relate to the disciples who flee and, if so, in what way?

Now focus on the painting. Have your reflections changed as a result?

The Betrayal of Christ

Day 2 - Reflections

In the years 1602-03 Caravaggio completed the Betrayal of Christ, drawing only briefly on some of the treatments of the same theme that had preceded his own work. The inclusion of St John as the fleeing and terror-struck young man to the left of the painting is the only serious piece of artistic licence departing from the gospel accounts. It is generally believed that St Mark is the fleeing young man described in Mark 14:51 and it was not until the time of Gregory the Great that anyone suggests this might be St John.

The work makes lavish use of the occasion and setting for the arrest. Darkness shrouds all seven characters, the only illumination coming from the last figure in the arresting train to the right of the picture (more of which we shall examine later) who holds a lantern high up to identify the suspect and to provide general light for the soldiers. The painting has a deliberate claustrophobia with all seven figures clustered around Jesus. The movement is from right to left so that with this full and perhaps even overwhelming (I like the modern 'in your face') intrusion, Jesus is pushed from the centre under the weight and force of the arriving arrestors. One can almost hear the noise and clamour amidst the confusion.

The figure of Jesus is central to the painting. Despite his furrowed brow, eyes closed in pained acceptance of his arrest, we see him receiving this betrayal as the will of God. His hands are clasped submissively or possibly in prayer. He gives way under the weight of the arriving group (or is it the agony of knowing his betrayer?) who almost knock him down and yet we know that his word will bring down the hosts of angels in heaven. The guards are contemporary to the period but their expressions are largely hidden from us. Their role here is easy for they represent power and strength. The polished armour of the guard who lunges for Jesus' neck occupies the centre of the work. At the tail end of the group there is the young man holding the lantern, none other than Caravaggio himself. This preoccupation with self-inclusion, a Hitchcock device, is intriguing. Is this the artist vainly providing light which is dim indeed next to the True Light? He is hardly a figure detached from the event. If the artist's intention is to draw us all into the frame, event, plot and characters, Caravaggio clearly knows where he stands. He is with the betrayers.

The young man, St John the apostle, is the only disciple shown, now turned away from Jesus with hands raised in shock and fear. Whether he is calling for help or in the throes of flight is not certain but next to Jesus who accepts these things, he cuts a striking picture of the frailty of the disciples who promise all. But it is not St John's proximity to Jesus that is the most startling of all. It is Judas Iscariot's. Contemporary Christian writing often attempts to rehabilitate Judas the Betrayer but Caravaggio will have none of it. His staring face is cold and remote. Through barely curled and pursed lips, lurching forward, Judas commits his awful crime. The ghostly eyes are fixed on a point beyond Jesus. This is not regret but the betrayer contemplating his gain with grim fixation even as Jesus falls to the soldiers.

The painting therefore vividly captures the drama described in the gospels but heightens both the sense of tragedy and terror but also the inner strength and resolve of Jesus. The themes are striking and bold and yet contain a personal element through Caravaggio's inclusion of himself with the arresting company. This invites us to relate to the themes through the artist's own eyes and perhaps ask the question 'On whose side would we have been?'

Further reading

Day 3

Isaiah 52:13–15

2 Corinthians 4:5–11

Matthew 16:21–7:8

These additional readings may assist our thinking

Isaiah 52:13–15

The prophet Isaiah foresaw the reign of God's anointed one, the so-called suffering servant. His dominion would reach to the nations and his greatness would command silence and yet this high status was in complete contrast with his former position. What we see is a change from the weakness of a bruised humanity, personified in the servant, to a radiant and exalted figure. The battered and 'ruined' servant is not beyond the reach of God's help. In fact, it is precisely a divine intervention that works such an extraordinary change and which hints at the greater miracle to be revealed that frail human flesh would one day *contain* the divine.

2 Corinthians 4:5–11

St Paul gives us the enduring picture of a treasure - Christ himself, but revealed in us who are like jars of clay, to show that the power belongs to God and not to us. The passage contrasts the frailty of humanity with the strength of God but also the life of God with our own mortality. In the West, we may not literally be crushed and persecuted but the experience of grace under pressure and of His ready help in our greatest need should be common to all Christians.

Matthew 16:21–7:8

The transfiguration story of Matthew's gospel continues the theme of divine glory with human weakness – the prediction of Jesus' death in shame contrasts with his transformation to glory seen by the inner group of disciples. And it is this revelation which is significant because it describes Jesus' nature and identity which would be otherwise hidden. It is not that one nature overwhelms the other, it is that by God's grace we understand who Jesus truly is.

Responding

Day 4

The readings and painting share a common theme. We see that Christ's glory is not some new existence given him but the disclosing of his true self. This is his glory, the one who accepts the will of God and his betrayal from one of the twelve disciples. His greatness is in his obedience and weakness. He withstands the temptation to destroy his enemies, he endures the kiss from the Betrayer, the disappearing and deserting disciples and holds his ground as they come to take him. For Christians, called to discipleship, the choice is clear and stark. Glory is not achieved by force of arms and not by abdication and flight. It is doing the will of God whatever the cost. The refusal to conform to the world, the steady trust in God in the face of hostility and wickedness, this is true greatness, this is true glory.

God, who before the Passion of thy only begotten Son revealed his majesty on the holy mount: grant that we thy servants may see his glory and be strengthened to bear the cross; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect for Lent 5

Resolutions

Day 5

How have you responded to the story and paintings over these 5 days?

Are there things you would like to do or to change in your life as a result of your thinking?

What are the things which prevent you from responding more wholeheartedly to Christ?

Write a short prayer expressing your feelings or response to what you have been thinking

CHAPTER 6

THE FLAGELLATION OF CHRIST

Picture title: 'The Flagellation of Christ' which can be found through an online search on <http://www.google.com/>

The Flagellation of Christ

Mark 15:16-20

Day 1 - Read and Reflect

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.

They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him.

And they began to call out to him, Hail, king of the Jews!

Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him.

And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Read the passage several times

Reflect

Try and imagine the scene described here. Can you envisage the expressions of the soldiers and of Jesus on the basis of the reading?

Why do you think the soldiers were so cruel here?

The descriptions of Jesus (the crown of thorns, the robe) are a parody of how a real King might be dressed. How do you imagine this looked?

Now focus on the painting. Have your reflections changed as a result?

The Flagellation of Christ

Day 2 – Reflections

Caravaggio painted at least two pictures called the Flagellation of Christ and there are some others too, bearing the same name, whose authenticity is usually considered doubtful. What is interesting about the two known to be authentic is that they were completed in the same year, 1607, during the Neapolitan period. The use of the same models for our Lord and tormentors is about the only area of convergence between the two for although both depict an idealised Christ and share a subject matter, their treatment and varied themes are quite different. What most consider the earlier work is included here, a portrait depicting the moment immediately prior to the flagellation. The painting possesses that photographic quality in which the figures are caught in mid action, on the verge of their grisly deed. This captured and fixed energy allows the artist to bring to the fore the innocence of the helpless victim and the cruelty of his assailants.

The use of an idealised figure was typical of the High Renaissance period and Caravaggio has drawn simply but effectively on this tradition. As the light bathes Jesus from above we see his unblemished torso in contrast to the gloom shrouding those near him. Here is the innocent, spotless Lamb of God alongside the cruel and vicious torturers. Nonetheless, it is a picture of a distinctly human Christ. We see the crown of thorns plaited on his head which is bowed to his left. This physical movement is part of the whole in which Jesus is being prepared for the assault still to come. The torturer to his right, for example, partially hidden in Jesus' own shadow, is tying the bonds behind him. To get a better leverage, his left foot is jammed against Jesus' right calf causing him to falter. The man at Jesus' feet is tying the brushwood together contemplating the securing of the victim prior to the attack. The most aggressive of the three stands to the right of Jesus, grasping his hair with his left hand, the right hand holding the weapon with which the beating will commence. His upper shoulder is tensed and ready to strike a vicious blow. The force of this can be seen on the man's face. There is no compassion for the suffering Galilean to be found here.

The four characters are brought into the foreground by the dimness of the background but it is only a dimness and not the darkness of other works. This allows the dancing shadows to quicken the immediacy of the moment. Jesus' own shadow falls on the man to his left, the assailant at his feet casts a shorter, fleeting shadow. The picture has a pace and drama therefore, we are witnessing a fast moving scene in which calculated and skilful strength is depicted. The torturers are about their clinical and grim business.

The Flagellation of Christ depicts then the moment so briefly described in the gospels. We see the beginning of the end of a man's life. He is clearly wearied, already stripped and deprived of liberty and dignity. He is now roughly manhandled and prepared for the assault. This act of securing the victim is redolent of the lamb before the slaughterers and the punishment of the innocent. It is this contrast between the vulnerable, captive Christ and his torturers that makes the picture both tragic and engaging

Whatever the idealised traditions that lie behind this most famous depiction, Caravaggio's treatment is much more brutal. He contrasts the innocence of Jesus, bathed in gentle light with the darkness of the aggressive assailants. It is not simply a bald depiction therefore but conveys its meaning and themes in a vital and dynamic manner and by this means, communicates the continuing and extraordinary mystery of God's love for sinful people.

Further reading

Day 3

Zechariah 9:9–12
Philippians 2:5–11
Matthew 27:1–54

These additional readings may assist our thinking

Zechariah 9:9–12

On Palm Sunday our minds inevitably turn to the journey of Jesus into Jerusalem. And at the heart of this story, amidst many important themes, there lies a contrast between the kind of kingly reign that Jesus came to establish and what others understood a king to be. This contrast is present in the Zechariah reading which describe the prisoners (God's people) who will be freed from their waterless pit. But their release is unexpected because it will come by the king who is *humble* and victorious. He is utterly different from the champion who is dressed for battle. The strength of his reign is seen in the establishment of peace and not war. We might usefully reflect here on how and in what way this foreshadows the sort of Kingdom Jesus brought.

Philippians 2:5–11

Many consider this passage to be a kind of poem which describes a call to holiness on the basis of the life and death of Jesus. He is the Servant King at whose name every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. His lordship is traced back to an extraordinary, perhaps even foolish act, namely, crucifixion. What we see here therefore are reasons for Christian living. Inspiring this sacrificial lifestyle is the *manner* of Jesus death and the sort of attitude that accompanied it.

Matthew 27:1–54

The longest of all the gospel readings (Matthew 27:1ff) adds weight to the sense that we stand at a pivotal and grave moment. The humble and obedient King is saving his own even as violence is meted out on him. The same contrast between the innocent Jesus and the actions of those who condemn and kill him makes the story both tragic, moving and inspiring.

The Flagellation of Christ

Day 4 – Responding

The killing of the innocent is not a theme to romanticize. It is an appalling act of violence and injustice, repeated the world over. In the history of human existence the ability and delight of man's own cruelty towards another human is the most damnable and shaming of all things. The force of the Flagellation lies in the way in which it exposes this ability and mind. The violence of the men, their willingness to avoid questions, to absolve themselves from all responsibility, not to see the created and vulnerable before their eyes – these things face us with similar questions about our own cruelties, our own sins. What is more significant in this picture is the way in which Jesus bears these cruelties. This is not to diminish the violence nor to explain and certainly not to justify it. But we see there is something else happening here as violence is met with humility and acceptance. The suffering King, giving his back to the 'smilers', offers, for the ugliness of hatred, the beauty and holiness of his own life. He is supremely our example and our Saviour, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. This is the point at which mercy triumphs over judgement and love over hatred. This is what makes forgiveness utterly extraordinary and grace so sublime.

Almighty and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, has sent thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility: mercifully grant that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect Palm Sunday

Resolutions

Day 5

How have you responded to the story and paintings over these 5 days?

Are there things you would like to do or to change in your life as a result of your thinking?

What are the things which prevent you from responding more wholeheartedly to Christ?

Write a short prayer expressing your feelings or response to what you have been thinking

CHAPTER 7

THE SUPPER AT EMMAUS

Picture title: 'The Supper at Emmaus' which can be found through an online search on <http://www.google.com/>

The Supper at Emmaus

Luke 24:13–32

Day 1 - Read and Reflect

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them;

but they were kept from recognising him.

He asked them, What are you discussing together as you walk along? They stood still, their faces downcast.

One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?

What things? he asked. About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.

The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;

but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.

Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.

He said to them, How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going further.

But they urged him strongly, Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.

Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight.

They asked each other, Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?

Read the passage several times

Reflect

Try and imagine the scene unfolding here. What is happening between Jesus and these two disciples as they discuss the recent past?

Why do you think the disciples could not recognise him at first and what caused recognition to dawn?

Can you think of occasions when your own eyes have been opened and your heart has burned within you? What caused this experience?

Now focus on the painting. Have your reflections changed as a result?

The Supper at Emmaus

Day 2 - Reflections

On this Easter Sunday we conclude our meditations with his *pièce de résistance*, the portrayal of the two disciples eating with Christ whom they did not initially recognise, having journeyed to Emmaus from Jerusalem. The picture was completed in 1601 and is an inspired description of the event recorded in Luke 24. There is of course another Supper at Emmaus completed some five years later which is equally compelling in its own way even if it lacks the force and drama of the first work and perhaps says more about the mind and condition of the artist at that time than does the 1601 painting.

Christ appropriately occupies centre stage. Although he lacks some of the robustness of the passion works, this has little effect on the drama of the overall work. Jesus is seated at table with a meal laid before him. His left hand is raised above the bread in blessing and though his right hand extends above the wine and water, it appears that this is not so much a blessing as a physical act of disclosure. Nothing appears to be said but the gesture invites the disciples to behold and to understand. Jesus' eyes are either closed or focused on the table. This reverential act keeps our primary focus on the gestures that reveal his identity. The moment, almost a sacramental and consecrating moment, is full of drama. The fruit, in a basket nearest to us, has been surely displaced in the sudden and unexpected commotion. It is tempting to imbue each and every course present with some hidden meaning – for example the fowl introducing the issue of death to the work. This is surely too much. Aside from the bread, water and wine and their clearly eucharistic overtones these simple and communal elements are simply part of the setting in which Jesus is revealed.

The innkeeper is the most passive of all the characters. He stands to the right of Jesus, hands placed on his belt, peering quite intently, it would seem, at the strange vision before him. He registers no surprise or shock. We are left to conclude for ourselves whether this is because he simply doesn't know Jesus (and never did) or whether there is a deeper blindness here.

The picture draws its greatest power from the two disciples, only one of whom is named for us in Scripture, as Cleopas. He is often identified with the man to Christ's right and therefore to our left. He grips the chair in either excitement or to steady himself. He leans forward, arrested and mesmerised by this unfolding epiphany. To the left of Jesus, arms wide in exaggerated and stunned surprise, sits the second disciple. His own gesture is equally dramatic as he is both thrown back from the table by his act and yet lurches forward his eyes fixed on the raised right hand of Christ. The shadows again underline the forward movement in the painting as though Jesus himself materialises before their eyes.

The painting has a clearly Eucharistic flavour but the work's greatest appeal is the explosive nature of Christ's own revelation, the moment of realisation for the two and the extraordinary effect it has on them. Easter must always be a time in which we are surprised by joy, mesmerised by the Risen Jesus and speechless as they were (literally)! As the painting depicts the moment when despair gives way to utter delight

and the gloom is replaced with hope and light, it speaks to us about the breaking in of Christ into our own lives and how Easter is more than a liturgical event or day in the lectionary, it is the very life of Christ, full of holy love and power made known to weak and stumbling disciples. To people like you and me.

Further reading

Day 3

Isaiah 12
1 Peter 1:3–9
John 20:1–10

These additional readings may assist our thinking

Isaiah 12

This song of joy is full of praise at the great deeds of God. The prophet's response to God's salvation is worship and adoration. The exuberance of his words indicate the depth of gratitude felt and also the trouble from which he has been delivered. There is no room for impoverished praise here or meanness of spirit. Here we could reflect on the part praise and thanksgiving plays in our own praying and whether we experience the same infectious joy described.

1 Peter 1:3–9

Peter is equally irrepressible in his exclamation: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ ...' (vs3) And the words of praise are linked to the resurrection of Jesus which has won the heaven of heavens for all who believe. For Peter, this sure knowledge was a source of encouragement in the troubles Christians were facing. These were temporary but the joy still to come would last forever. This eternal perspective is helpful in a time when Christians tend to emphasize the present blessings and seldom consider the life everlasting.

John 20:1–10

It has always puzzled me that this is a reading chosen for Easter Sunday, not that it hasn't anything to say but rather that it lacks the drama of the Emmaus Road story or the encounter of Mary which continues at John 20:10. But the reading focuses on the matter of *believing* and is still therefore vitally important. Although the believing is incomplete for Peter and John (vs 9, 'They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus *had* to rise from the dead') it marks the beginning of something new. The burial cloth and empty tomb only point the way or signpost the great miracle of the resurrection. In this sense, and here we may reflect on our own experiences, nothing, especially not fabric and rock, can replace a living encounter with the Living Christ.

Responding

Day 4

The scene is far removed from the empty tomb, the sorrow of Mary and even the confusion of Peter and John as they come to the grave. Earlier in the day, these same travelling companions had named Jesus as a figure of past events – ‘we *had* hoped ...’ they say. And now that hope lives again for them. Only the lonely innkeeper, physically nearest Jesus but furthest from him in truth, hints at the possibility of missing the joy of this hour. For us, Lent is now passed. Forty days of searching, of deep thinking and prayer. And so we come to the moment of deepest celebration, the night is far past and the day is truly at hand. We are invited to join these two sojourners, to see Him, reach for him, love him and to long for him. This is true joy. Death hath no more dominion over him. He is alive and our hearts burn within us. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ has overcome death and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life: strengthen and increase our faith that we may know Him and the power of his resurrection and live to thy glory forever; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with thee and the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Collect for Easter Sunday

Resolutions

Day 5

How have you responded to the story and paintings over these 5 days?

Are there things you would like to do or to change in your life as a result of your thinking?

What are the things which prevent you from responding more wholeheartedly to Christ?

Write a short prayer expressing your feelings or response to what you have been thinking