

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Alternative Reflection for Session 16: The Resurrection

Offered at Greenbelt 2017, Session 3, Meeting Christ on the Way, a taster for ‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’ on Monday, 28 August 2017, 11.45am - 12:45pm, in Canvas/The Shelter

Text: Luke 24:25-35

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

Reflection:

Let’s picture the scene. A man’s been talking for a while with two others. They’d met earlier in the day, two friends trudging back from Jerusalem and a stranger also travelling on the road. The friends are amazed that the other traveller seems unaware of recent events in Jerusalem. ‘Don’t you know what’s happened?’ they ask. They’ve been through a catastrophe, which they’ve found traumatic and shocking, and this traveller seems oblivious to it. It’s as if the Twin Towers had fallen in 2001, and somehow, someone later that September hadn’t heard about it. So the friends share the story of their disaster. The stranger listens. And then the conversation takes an odd turn; the stranger moves to instruct, challenging the two friends. Yes, they too know the Biblical story of how God has been revealed to the people of Israel. But this stranger invites them to understand that story in a wholly new way. Disaster has taken place: the proverbial Twin Towers have fallen. But instead of a cataclysmic end, the stranger invites them to look at what’s happened as God’s new beginning.

And now they’re sat down at dinner, trying to understand what’s going on in their lives and in the world. And they’re also wondering why they’ve warmed to this stranger so much. Then, before they realise what’s going on, the stranger picks up the bread, breaks it, and utters words of thanks to God.

Suddenly the pair realise that they know this man. Is he really a stranger? Surely this is the very Jesus who died on a cross a few days earlier. Why hadn’t they recognised him before? It’s this very moment of shock and surprise that’s so brilliantly captured by Caravaggio. For good reasons, this painting is among the most famous in the National Gallery’s collection.

In the faces and gestures of the strangely lit figures there is astonishment, longing, excitement, hope, incredulity – a host of mixed and contradictory emotions. And in the midst of it all is a deeply calm and yet purposeful figure, the person of Jesus, the risen Christ. Caravaggio captures it all.

The culmination of the story brings a poignant role-reversal. The hosts have now become the guests. The stranger welcomed for a meal is now the host, blessing their simple meal. They recognise Jesus through what he does. This isn't the last supper of the upper room. Rather this is the first supper of a new era. A time of radical liberation. The start of a whole new world. A world that's lived in the light of the resurrection.

Caravaggio is legendary because of his use of light. His emphatic compositions rely on deep blacks and vivid illumination. And his paintings push composition and colour to their limits, with his technique helping us to concentrate on what makes the Emmaus story so miraculous.

The complex relationship between darkness and light, between absence and presence, is a thread that runs through the whole Biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. One theologian, Cally Hammond, writes about the paradox of a faith founded on the events of Jesus' Passion and Resurrection. She says that such a faith 'takes us to places of darkness, where we might expect to encounter fear and horror; but instead we find [that] all things, ultimately, [are] transformed into light and glory.' She goes on to suggest that 'even darkness itself will be redeemed and renewed.' And she concludes: 'It's as if the tomb of the grace were turned into the womb of new birth.' She's talking about the transformation of darkness as a place of danger, evil, and death, into a place of nurture, of protection, even of 'the very essence of divine love.'¹

In Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*, the evening supper table is surrounded not by the darkness of death and tragedy, but the redeemed darkness of expectation and hope. The table is illuminated by the vital light of the one who is the Light of the World, and his blessing blesses the 'close and holy darkness' too.²

Jesus stretches his hand over the food: a meagre roast chicken with its spindly drumsticks, a basket of fruit precariously balanced on the edge of the table, and to our left a trio of objects to which Jesus gently points with his other hand. That trio is bread, wine, and water. This is a simple supper. This is a Eucharistic meal.

Another theologian, John Drury, suggests that the painting holds together 'high-definition homeliness' with 'high drama.' Caravaggio created this tension by focusing on 'Christ's blessing of food', drawing our eyes into the story through the striking contrast of light and darkness. This interpretation suggests that the painting depicts the Eucharistic meal as 'archetype of all [such] celebrations.' John Drury continues: 'Held in this moment of the transubstantiation of inert matter by energetic spirit, Caravaggio can show a community of strongly differentiated and individual people and, like a priest at the altar, invite the spectator into it.'³

¹ All quotes from: Hammond, Cally. *Glorious Christianity*, 2012, p. 13.

² Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales*.

³ All quotes from: Drury, John. *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and their Meanings*, 1999, p. 125.

Christ's gesture of blessing parallels the right-most figure's splayed fingers, spread wide with emotion, invading our space, on the outer edge of the picture. This is the out-stretched arm-span of amazement. While Christ's gesture, on the other hand, is one that extends love.

And what is more, Christ's gesture points to abundance. It abides in this temporary space, just before he vanishes, leaving the intense memory of burning hearts.

Everything has changed. And yet, everything is the same. The bread is still there. But it's no longer merely bread, because it is blessed by Christ's resurrection touch.

So this table is not a barrier between us and the outstretched hands of Jesus. For this is not a private meal: rather there's space for us, too, at this table where heaven and earth meet together.

Reflection by Dr Ayla Lepine,

Ordinand at Westcott House & Visiting Fellow in Art History at the University of Essex



THE NATIONAL GALLERY

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’

Alternative Prayer for Session 16: The Resurrection

Offered at Greenbelt 2017, Session 3, Meeting Christ on the Way, a taster for ‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’ on Monday, 28 August 2017, 11.45am - 12:45pm, in Canvas/The Shelter

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

God of all hopefulness, you have revealed to us the promise of eternal life in raising your Son, Jesus Christ, from death.

Help us to recognise Jesus when we glimpse him on our journeys, in the breaking of the bread, and in those whom we meet on the way.

Grant that we might walk with humility and gratitude, always open to the love you’ve shown us, until at last we see Jesus face-to-face, on the last day.

Amen.