

## ***Theology in Pictures***

***Professor Morna Hooker***

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Deuteronomy 4:9-18

John 1:1-5, 10-14, 16-18

‘Take good care not to fall into the infamous practice of making for yourselves carved images in the form of any statue’. The Old Testament prohibition of what we may describe as ‘religious art’ was based, as we heard in our Old Testament reading, on the fact that God had revealed himself to his people on the mountain in fire and cloud; but though they had heard his voice, they saw no form. No-one, not even Moses, was ever permitted to see the face of God. And of course the moment one attempts to represent anything in picture or in sculpture, one is necessarily defining it – presenting the way in which one ‘sees’ it. Portray your God, and you are necessarily cutting him down to size – a size determined by yourself. I can present you with a stern, cruel God, or a kind, loving one. But God cannot be confined to one artistic portrayal, any more than he can be defined in one credal summary, for he himself is invisible, incomprehensible. To attempt to portray God in art is to reverse the logic of creation; instead of God making man in his image, we have man making God in *his*.

Islam continued the tradition of Judaism, and as a result developed its distinctive geometric patterns. Alone among the three Abrahamic faiths, Christianity has permitted and even encouraged religious art – though even in the Christian tradition there have been hiccups, such as the iconoclasm of the Puritans. So why did Christianity apparently ignore the commands found in the Old Testament? The answer must lie in the central Christian belief in the incarnation, summed up for us in the reading from John 1: the Word became flesh, and we saw his glory – the glory appropriate to the Son

of God. No-one has ever seen God – but Jesus Christ has made him known.

A word once spoken is vulnerable – open to misunderstanding; the glory revealed in the face of Jesus Christ is equally vulnerable. Just as Jesus, the Word made flesh, was vulnerable to misunderstanding, rejection, and crucifixion, so the grace and truth he embodied were vulnerable to misunderstanding – to wayward theologies and heresies. But God's glory – in other words, his nature, or character, has been revealed in order to be seen – and to be comprehended, to the degree that those who see it are *able* to comprehend it. And what men and women saw in him they now portrayed in their art. Each conveyed their experience of God as best they could.

Religious art, it has been said, is theology in pictures – and, of course, sculpture. Indeed, for many centuries, art – in the form of frescos stained glass windows – was probably the most important way in which ordinary people were provided with any theological education. Imagine yourself in a mediaeval church service. The mass would be in Latin, though it might be comprehensible through familiarity, but the readings from scripture would also be in Latin, and meaningless to all but the clergy; sermons, though written in Latin, would probably be delivered in the vernacular – but who listens to sermons?

No, if you want to know how ordinary people learned their theology, go to King's College, and study the stained glass windows, where the biblical story is laid out in a glorious riot of colours – though sadly, in this case, so far away that you need a telescopic lens to see it. But in King's, too, one is aware of how the pictures reflect the beliefs of those who made – and commissioned them. The Reformation brought changes to the scenes that were portrayed; purgatory, for example, said to have been included in the original plans, disappeared from the project. As for the role of Henry VIII himself, we see him in disguise, in the pictures of the triumphant Moses, Solomon, and David. Religious art has become confused with political correctness.

Religious art depicts the story of God's self-revelation. But it reflects also the interpretation of those who carry it out. We see things in terms of our own experience, and this is certainly true of how we 'see' God. As an example, let us think of some of the ways in which the death of Christ, which must be the commonest of all Christian images, is depicted. The earliest representation that has been preserved is not Christian at all, but is the doodle of an unbeliever, mocking the absurd story of a God who accepted crucifixion. It was scratched on a plaster wall found in Rome, probably about AD 200, and Christ is given a donkey's head. The sketch indicates very clearly the way in which the artist viewed Christ's crucifixion; he obviously thought that the Christian Alexamenos was as asinine as his god.



Alexamenos Graffito - 'Alexamenos worships his god'  
Palatine Hill Museum, Rome

Contrast the ivory panel, one of four dating from about AD 420-30, originally part of a small casket. The figure of the crucified Christ dominates the picture – but this is not the anguished Christ so familiar to us from later depictions, but ‘Christus Victor’ – a victorious Christ. The artist depicts his belief that through his death Christ triumphed over the powers of evil and set men and women free from sin and death. Christ reigns triumphantly from the tree – above his head the placard ‘King of the Jews’ – while on the left of the picture the repentant Judas hangs from another tree, his money bag at his feet. The figure of Christ, apparently untouched by suffering, conveys at once the central beliefs in his death *and* resurrection.



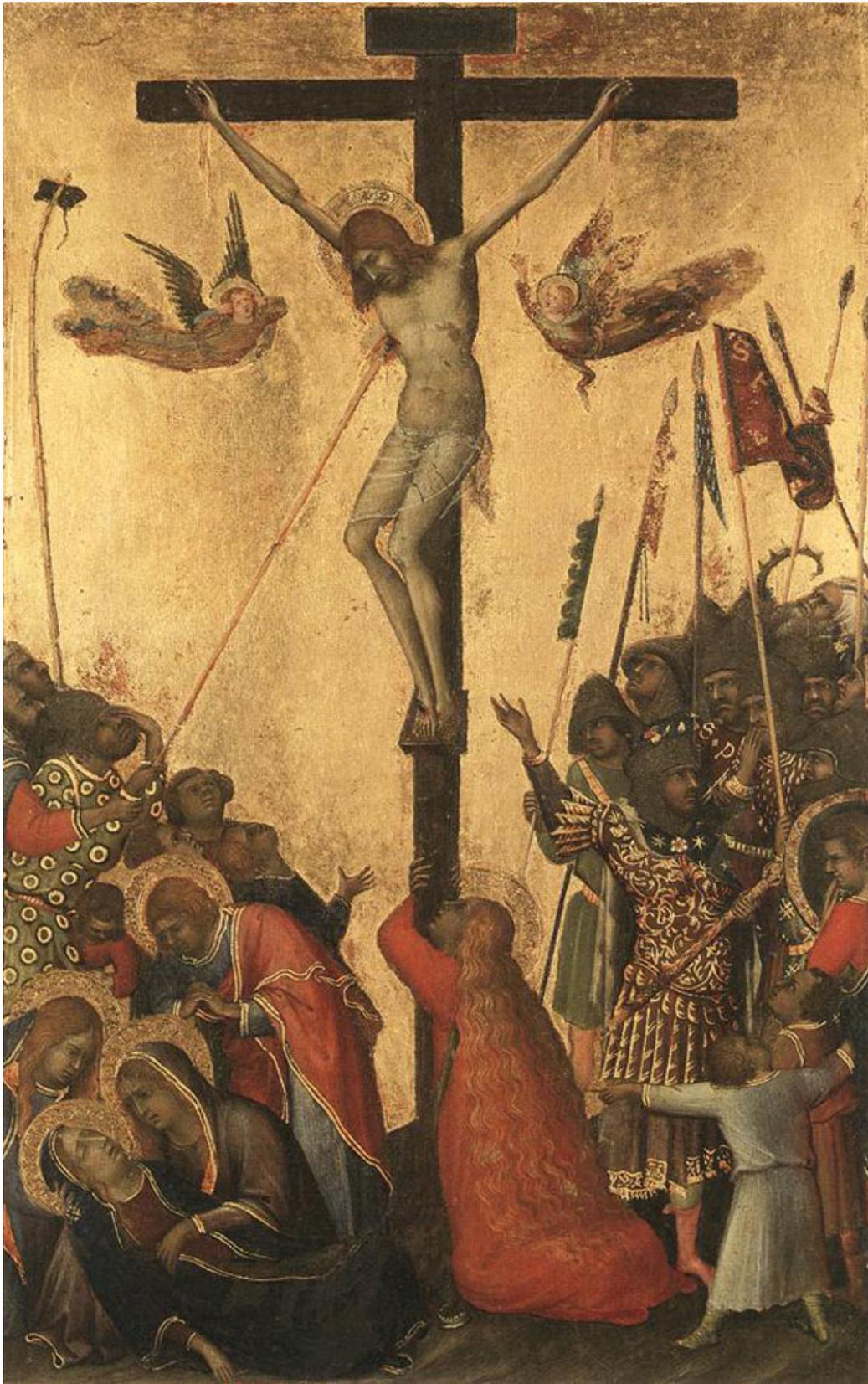
Panel from ivory casket, AD 420-30 (British Museum)

‘*Why did Christ die?*’ is a question that has dominated much of Christian theology – a question which expects more than a merely historical answer. And here, in this simple carving, is one answer: Adam brought sin and death into the world, but now Christ has undone what Adam did, and has triumphed over both sin and death.

This understanding of Christ's death seems to have been the dominant one for many hundred years or so – and indeed has continued in the many empty crosses found in so many churches and chapels – for example, here in Robinson. The empty cross conveys not simply Christ's death but his resurrection, without which, as St Paul remarked many centuries ago, his death has no meaning.

Other theologians gave other answers, and tended to concentrate on the agony of Christ's death, and the price he paid for humanity's redemption. The great majority of artists followed suit, and representations of the crucifixion from the thirteenth century onwards remind us of the anguish and pain of Christ, deserted and betrayed by his friends, and handed over to the conquering power of Rome to be executed in the most painful and shameful manner possible.

The painting of the crucifixion painted by Simone Martini in the early fourteenth century demonstrates this. Although Christ has a halo, and is apparently supported by angels, there is no doubt about the reality of his suffering – and indeed, of his shame, for though (as in all depictions) he is not shown naked, as would have been the case, his covering is of the scantiest imaginable. His sufferings are conveyed, not so much by his own expression – though his body is contorted – as by the grief of his mother and friends; Mary Magdalene clings to his cross. The stark message is clear: 'This is what your sin has done'.



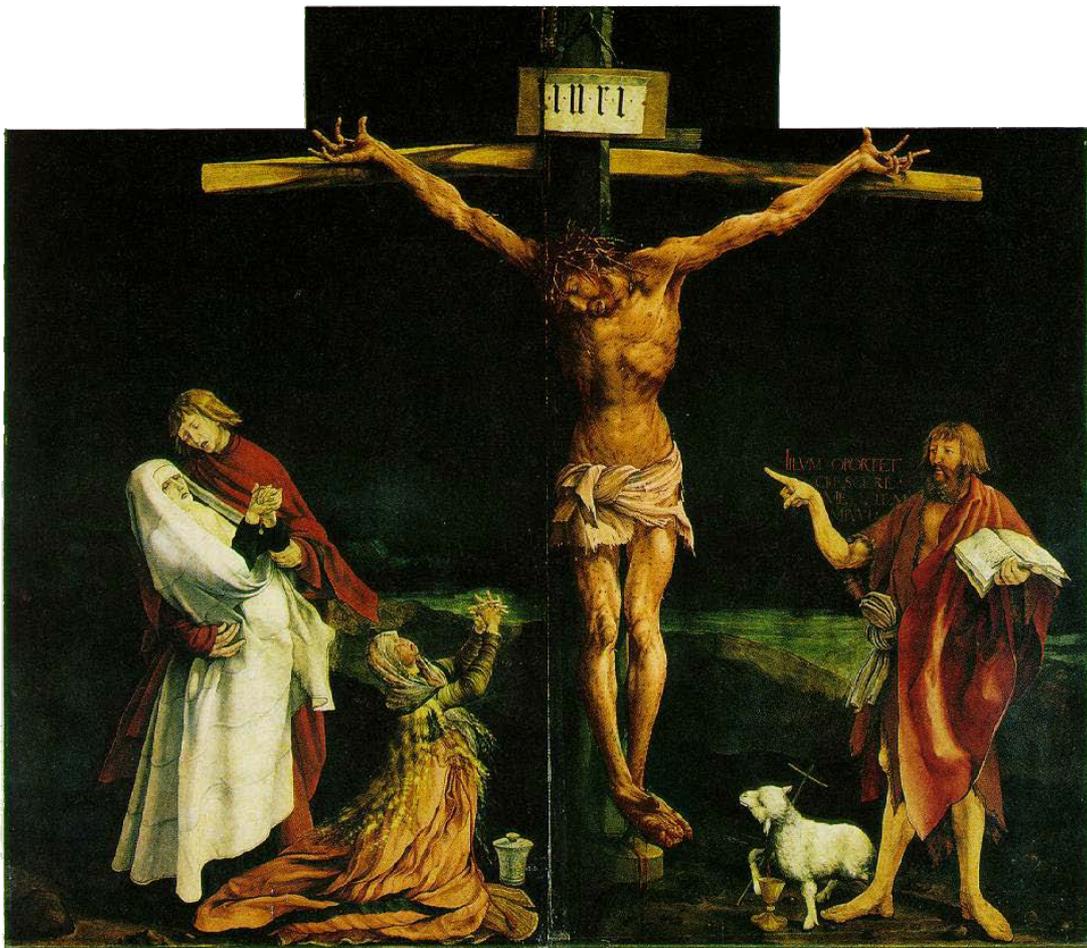
Simone Martini, altarpiece  
Royal Museum of fine arts, Antwerp

The Röttgen Pietà, made at approximately the same time, conveys the same emotions. The grief-stricken Mary holds the dead body of Christ in her arms. In contrast to many representations of Mary with her dead son, *this* Mary is overcome with sorrow and anger. Both she, and the corpse she holds, are very human. She seems to confront us accusingly, offering the emaciated figure of her son to us, seeking our repentance.



Röttgen Pietà, c.1300-25, painted wood, LandesMuseum, Bonn

One famous painting, dating from 1515, depicts a similarly suffering Christ, but conveys a slightly different message. It is the famous Isenheim altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald, commissioned by the Monastery of St Anthony for the hospice where monks and nuns cared for victims of the plague and leprosy. The sick were brought each day to pray before the altar, and the particular message of the painting to them was that Christ not only understood but shared their sufferings.



Grünewald, Isenheim altarpiece, Unterlinden Museum, France

Close inspection of the picture reveals that the body of Christ is covered in plague-like sores – hardly part of the original narrative, but particularly meaningful to the patients in the hospice. To them, it conveyed the message that Christ understood and shared *their* sufferings. The crucifixion was not part of a remote transaction in which God forgave sins, but Christ’s identification with humankind, bringing them relief in their agony and resurrection with him.



Skip forward four hundred years, and consider another artist trying to find an answer to the suffering that surrounded him. This is Max Beckmann, a native of Saxony, who served as a medical orderly during the First World War<sup>1</sup>. His style changed dramatically, we are told, as a result of his war-time experiences, and nowhere is this more obvious than in his painting of the Deposition, where Beckmann's work with the dead and dying influences his perspective. The body of the dead Christ, his arms still outstretched, is elongated and distorted, and covered in bruises and sores. It is a powerful picture, conveying vividly the agony endured by Christ – and by those who died in the trenches. But what is its message? Is Beckmann, like Grünewald, suggesting that Christ shares all human sorrow? Or is he simply conveying the futility of war? Or does the ladder, strangely leading up

<sup>1</sup>*I am grateful to Dr Mary Stewart for bringing Max Beckmann's work to my attention*

into heaven, rather than being propped against the cross, perhaps offer some hope of a way out?



Max Beckmann, *Deposition*  
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Contrast John Piper's portrayal of the deposition on the wall behind me – one could hardly imagine a more different picture! The figures are mere silhouettes, dressed in garments which would have been worn at the time the original carving, on which this is based, was made<sup>2</sup>. There is no hint of suffering, except in the bowed heads of the women on either side. Rather this conveys the message of Jesus' final

<sup>2</sup>The original carving, in the Externsteine, in west Germany, dates from the twelfth century, and appears to have been created by monks from the nearby Benedictine Abbey. The ceramic panel, designed by John Piper, was made by Geoffrey Eastop.

triumphant words in John's Gospel: 'it is finished'. The work is done, God the Father looks on approvingly from on high, and Adam and Eve, imprisoned at the base of the tree, hold up their hands in hope of what is to come.



John Piper, Deposition  
Robinson College Chapel

When the early Church drew up its creeds, it made no attempt to answer the question 'why did Christ die?' beyond expressing its belief in the forgiveness of sins. Theologians might argue how this

was achieved – but who was to say which of them was right? The pictures we have looked at are just of a few of the thousands of images produced during the past two thousand years attempting to portray the meaning of Christ's suffering. There are many more – for example the image of the sacrificial lamb, which occurred in the choir's first anthem this evening. The different images reflect the presuppositions, beliefs, and needs of the artists – and demonstrate the significance each of them has found in Christ's death and resurrection. Each image concentrates on one particular aspect of that meaning, and the results are often very different, but truth is greater than us all; the artists, grasping a small part of that truth, invite us to share their vision, and to glimpse with them a little of the glory of God reflected in the crucified and risen Christ.