

Evensong

10 October 2021

Theme: Hidden in Plain Sight

Painting: The Supper at Emmaus by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Preached at St James' Church via Zoom

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Today we are reminded in Luke's Gospel of what happened three days after Jesus was crucified.

Here we find ourselves firstly walking on a road to a village called Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem. Two Christians are walking and talking. They were in despair and confused as they tried to make sense of what happened to Jesus Christ, three days after their Hero was arrested, severely beaten, crucified, killed and buried.

But their search for understanding only led to more confusion and hopelessness until Jesus literally walked with them and explained the Scriptures. Of course, they did not recognise Jesus, he was, in a sense hidden in plain sight. The scripture says, "their eyes were prevented from recognising Him."

Jesus wanted them to understand the truth by explaining the essentials that they cannot see yet. The Saviour of the world must die first as the ultimate atonement for sin so we can be reconciled with the Holy God.

Of course, Cleopas and his companion (we think Luke) were convinced that Jesus is the Christ, a great prophet who was destined to free Israel from Roman rule. Remember they had no idea that Jesus was walking with them.

Sadly, Cleopas missed the most important point of all: Jesus is God incarnate. He is more than a prophet. He is the Logos – the

Word - the perfect God who created and holds the universe together.

If you read this account in its entirety, you will find that Jesus underscored His resurrection as the crucial element of the Christian faith. The resurrection supported God's claim that He is the one true God who fulfilled ancient prophecies about the much-awaited Messiah. He lived among us to redeem the human race, sinners like you and me. His offer of salvation is still an invitation to you and me today.

The second part of our Gospel reading today is depicted in a breath-taking way by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio who lived from 1571 to 1610 (38 years).

In 1601 Caravaggio painted "The Supper at Emmaus" and many artists have subsequently painted their own versions of this. None though in my opinion come close to this masterpiece.

The original is in the UK's National Gallery. This artwork is a major contribution to the history of art, as before Caravaggio's painting, compositions were of posed static figures.

His innovations inspired Baroque painting and his influence can be seen in the work of Rubens, Ribera, Bernini, and Rembrandt. His personal story is an interesting and tumultuous one, which I will include in the written version of this Homily.

The stranger on the road (who we know was Jesus) was invited to stay with Cleopas and his fellow traveller. The painting depicts just three verses of the Gospel.

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us, while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Let's look at this painting in detail:

This artwork captures a split second in time, an exact moment in the story. It is the millisecond between revelation and evaporation, Christ disappearing from the world.

It is only at dinner when Christ blesses the bread that the disciples recognise him. Remember Christ disappears, immediately after he has blessed the bread and they recognise.

It is not from his appearance that they recognise him, as he is depicted clean shaven, and the robes that he is wearing are covering any indication of wounds that he suffered during the crucifixion, instead he is recognised from the gesture of him raising his arm to bless the bread.

In this split second to Christ's left Luke, flings his arms out wide, mirroring Christ's posture on the cross. He wears the shell of a pilgrim, a symbol very familiar to us at St James'.

Next to Christ is the Innkeeper, unfazed and unaware of the significance of Christ's gesture. On the left Cleopas pushes himself up from his chair at the sudden recognition that they are dining with Christ.

Rather than the idealised portraits of the past, Caravaggio has depicted the disciples as they would have been, aged and wrinkled, with dirty hands. The Innkeeper is unshaven, and Cleopas has torn clothes.

Let's look more closely though at the use of light and shadow, and the still life placed deliberately on the table. This still life represents aspects of Christ.

The bread that Christ blesses is flesh. The bird or fowl on the plate is mirroring death.

The basket of fruit is placed on the edge of the table and is almost falling off. In the bowl is fruit in various states showing life, resurrection and new birth.

The grapes in the bowl go with the bread and while the bread is his flesh, grapes make wine, a symbol of Christ's blood.

The final and for me most startling discovery is in the basket itself. In an otherwise perfectly painted picture, the basket has a cane awry. The artist has used the light in the painting and this cane, to cast a shadow in the shape of a fish's tail. A fish being a symbol of Christ. So much hidden in plain sight.

One commentator said that among the countless symbols that punctuate the religious painting, this delicately described detail – half in shade and half in light – transforms Caravaggio's celebrated canvas from a mere illustration of a scripture scene into something active and daring – a spiritual challenge whose stages could not be higher¹.

This symbol of a fish or Ichthys emblem, according to scholarship dates to the 2nd Century as a sign of Christian belief. It was employed by followers who feared persecution from non-believers as secret sign of their Christian beliefs.

To ensure that you were in the company of a fellow Christian, a semi-circular arch was traced on the ground. If the stranger then drew a mirroring arch, thereby forming the crude outline of a fish, you could consider yourself to be in the presence of a fellow Christian (see Grovier., p3).

This act which serves as an acknowledgement of a fellow Christian is clearly relevant to a painting that is devoted to the topic of spiritual recognition.

So, our reading today has several things to say to us:

It demonstrates that belief in Jesus as the risen Lord was not self-evident to his earliest followers, even after his crucifixion and resurrection. The reason why people back then came to believe in him was that he appeared to them. In other words, it took divine revelation for them to believe. That was true for Peter (24:34), and it was true for the men who travelled on the road to Emmaus. For us it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we come to believe.

The setting for most people to come to faith is Christian worship. It takes place for us in Church or House Groups, or settings which include Scripture, proclamation, prayer, and sacrament. It is the place where Jesus continues to reveal himself. In the sacrament and in coming together we share water, bread, wine, and expressions of mutual care, relationship, and hospitality. We care for the stranger, outcast or refugee.

And, finally, the story for today is one of movement.

1. The two men “are going” (24:13)
2. Jesus “came near and went with them” (24:15),
3. they “came near” Emmaus (24:28),
4. Jesus “walked ahead of them” (24:28),
5. “he went in to stay with them” (24:29),
6. “he vanished from their sight” (24:31), and
7. “they got up and returned to Jerusalem” (24:33).

Jesus and his followers in our reading today are on the move, and this has a purpose, and that is to tell the story of Jesus, to interpret it, to have fellowship (communion) with Jesus and others, and then to share it. That is what it means to be the church.

Amen

About Caravaggio.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born in Milan on 29 September 1571, He was active in Rome for most of his artistic life. During the final four years of his life he moved between Naples, Malta, and Sicily until his death.

In the early years of the 17th Century, he was brought to trial on at least 11 occasions. The charges included swearing at a constable, penning satirical verses about a rival painter, and chucking a plate of artichokes in a waiter’s face.

And then, in 1606, he was forced to flee Rome, after killing a man during a brawl sparked by a dispute over a game of tennis. He spent the rest of his life on the run, before he collapsed and died, on 18 July 1610, while travelling back to Rome to seek a pardon from the Pope.

Bibliography

Grover, Kelly. 2021, June 18. Caravaggio’s The Supper at Emmaus features a snag in a wicker basket that mirrors an underground Christian. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20210617-the-supper-at-emmaus-a-coded-symbol-hidden-in-a-masterpiece>. BBC. Accessed 9 October 2021