

Art and the Bible Story – The Resurrection

Luke 24: 25-35

‘But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’

Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. 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?’

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Around the table

1. What do I find interesting, new or challenging about the image and/or the passages that we’ve read?
2. How do I relate to the picture in terms of understanding the Christian faith?
3. What does a focus on this picture say to us about following Christ today?



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, The Supper at Emmaus, 1601

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Reflection by Dr Chloë Reddaway

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This is one of the most famous paintings, by one of the greatest artists, in the National Gallery collection. We could talk about this painting for a week and not exhaust it. I have seven minutes this morning. So I'm going to focus on one thing only, and that is 'recognition'.

The Supper at Emmaus is a 'recognition event': an occasion when people recognise the presence of God. There are recognition events throughout the Bible and they are mysterious, and utterly compelling.

The gospels describe Jesus as having a miraculous birth, as performing miracles, and as rising from the dead; and the disciples – at key moments – recognise what these events mean: that Jesus is the Son of God. Not just another wonder worker or magician, but divine. The disciples move through amazement, through surprise and confusion, to understanding. And that experience of confusion, followed by recognition, is a crucial one. The recognition of the apparently unfamiliar is a key factor in Christian experience.

The first post-resurrection recognition event is Mary Magdalene at the tomb, realising that the man she is talking to 'the gardener,' who turns out to be Christ. And then comes the Supper at Emmaus. The disciples have travelled with Christ, not realising with whom they speak. Then, 'when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.' They had not seen: suddenly they did see. A gesture – a reminder of what Christ did at the Last Supper – has alerted them to his identity.

As the etymology of the word suggests, recognition involves an awareness which harks back to something previous. It is a re-knowing of something which therefore requires a pre-knowing. It involves a kind of memory. At Emmaus, the memory is of the Last Supper.

But the capacity to recognise God's presence is not always tied to a specific action in this way. The memory of God is the vestige or trace of the image of God which remains in human beings after the Fall. It is the bit of human nature which seeks to be in right relation to God, and which means that we can be redeemed. It is the 'memory' of a state of grace which enables a return to it.

The terms associated with salvation (repentance, atonement and so on) indicate a return to somewhere, to something – someone – already experienced. This 'redeemable memory' is at work when people recognise the presence of God. Even in their shock and grief after the Crucifixion, after their journey, and their preoccupation with the recent events, the disciples are finally able to recognise Christ at supper with them.

Let's be honest: the Incarnation and the Resurrection are confusing. They are paradoxical. We may find them baffling, overwhelming, perhaps even hard to accept. Images like this one are a visual accompaniment to our struggle to understand. The images themselves

struggle: how can a painting really portray Christ, fully man and fully divine? It can't. It is only ever a failed attempt. But the failed attempt is valuable precisely because it 'recognises', it 'visualises' our struggle to recognise God.

In its entirely proper failure to depict God's presence on earth it reminds us of that crucial passage from amazement and confusion to recognition. It reminds us of the ease with which we can overlook God's presence. It prompts us to pay attention.

For artists, the challenge of painting Christ is the challenge to paint someone to be encountered as a stranger and then recognised; to paint the familiar and unfamiliar. The artist cannot provide the viewer with the access to Christ which those who encountered him during his life time had; but the artist may be able to engender something like the recognition experienced by those who first understood who Christ was.

And so Caravaggio presents us with a scene which is startling, rather than entirely familiar. He allows us to see what the disciples have just seen. But also to see why they might have overlooked what was right in front of them until this moment. Christ is blessing the bread but his left hand is partially obscured by the roasted fowl. His right hand points towards us but we have to work a little to distinguish the central cluster of bird, bread and hand. This is, of course, a communion table, but Caravaggio has not cleared away the paraphernalia of a normal supper to make that obvious. We have to pick out the fair linen, the bread, the water and the wine.

And the Christ who blesses is depicted as beardless and youthful: perfect sacrifice as well as priest. Although this was a common way of depicting Christ in early Christian art, it became more usual to depict him with a beard. The youthful authority of this figure is particularly striking in contrast to the older, hairier and rather grizzled disciples. It's a scene which compels our attention. And Caravaggio, having stopped us in our tracks, gives us various 'ways into' it. We are drawn forwards by Christ's right hand. But other things pull us in too.

The painting 'breaks into' our space with same surprising ease with which the resurrected Christ appears and vanishes. The outstretched arms of the disciple on the right form a bridge between us and the figure of Christ and reach out to us. The chair of the disciple on the left is pushed backwards into 'our' space as he starts forward. His elbows project backwards, a tear in one sleeve revealing his shirt in a flash of eye-catching white. Even the basket of fruit is about to topple into our space and cries out to us to catch it.

These are things that reach out and pull us in. We are invited to this communion table. We are alongside the disciples as their eyes are opened. We are challenged to be alert to the presence of God and to recognise it amongst us.

A prayer

Revealing God, who has shown yourself to us in the person of Jesus Christ, come and open our eyes and enlighten our hearts, that we may recognise the glory of God among us, and might know the hope to which we have been called; to the glory of your name. **Amen**

Art and the Bible Story – Pentecost

Acts 2:1-39 (extracts)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that ... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ..."

'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power ... this man ... you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. ...

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.' Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said ..., 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'

Around the table

1. What do I find interesting, new or challenging about the image and/or the passages that we've read?
2. How do I relate to the picture in terms of understanding the Christian faith?
3. What does a focus on this picture say to us about following Christ today?



Giotto and Workshop, Pentecost, probably about 1310-18

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Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay

Assistant Curate, St Martin-in-the-Fields

A first thing to note concerns the significance of the loud sound like a violent wind, and the tongues of fire. This is a clear sign of an encounter with the presence of God that echoes similar such encounters in the Old Testament. It especially resonates with the giving of the law on mount Sinai in Exodus 19 where we read: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire [and] ... the whole mountain shook violently.”

So Luke is letting us know that this event is a special meeting with God. I think that Giotto is trying to capture something of this in the glowing gold of his painting.

A second point to register is that, while we can reasonably see this Pentecost event as the beginning of the story of the Church, we should also see it as the continuation of the story of Jesus. Although Jesus has died, been resurrected, and recently ascended to heaven, that is not the end of Jesus’ story. His story continues here. It continues through the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of our Trinitarian God.

And just as Jesus’ public ministry was marked by the Holy Spirit coming down on him at his baptism, and him being filled with the Holy Spirit, so in a similar way the Holy Spirit comes down upon the disciples at the beginning of their public mission, and “all of them” are filled with the Holy Spirit. In his painting Giotto seems to suggest that the “all of them” is just the twelve apostles; but I don’t think this adequately reflects Luke’s account in the gospel. For it is most likely that it’s the group of 120 identified in Acts 1 who are those who “were all together in one place” at the start of Acts 2.

This also chimes with the large number of different languages which the crowd hear the disciples speaking in, with more than 12 different locations from around the then known world named in Luke’s long list. And this suggests that there were at least a dozen different mother tongues. Again this is an aspect of the story which Giotto doesn’t adequately depict in his painting, with just three outsiders listening in to the group of disciples, acting as tokens of the wider group.

The conclusion that it would have been the full group of 120 disciples also makes more sense when we connect with a third point worth emphasising from this story, which is the universal nature of what God is doing. This is evident in the way that all the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit; in the fact that Jews “from every nation under heaven” were gathered in Jerusalem and hear the disciples speaking in their own language; in the promise that Peter quotes from Joel that God will pour out the Spirit upon all flesh, including both men and women, young and old. And we can also infer from the multitude of different

languages spoken by the disciples, that this 'all' means people of every language and ethnicity.

So all the usual distinctions of gender, age, status and ethnicity are swept aside in this universal action of God in pouring out the Spirit upon human beings. And Peter reinforces this at the end of his sermon, when he says: "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." At this Pentecost event, it is evident that God wants to form a new and radically inclusive community which embraces every type of person.

A final point is worth drawing out. The coming of the Holy Spirit is a fulfilment of what God has promised, as Jesus has earlier told to his disciples: "see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised" (Luke 24:49). Peter emphasises this aspect of promise in his sermon, speaking of Jesus as, "exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, ... has poured out this that you both see and hear." And Peter goes on to emphasise that this is not something just promised to an elite few who followed Jesus in his earthly ministry, but "the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." This is a promise with a universal invitation.

And, as a promise it is a sign that this is what God had always intended. Whatever shape Israel may have taken in the past, what Pentecost reveals is the true shape that God always had planned for Israel, which was to be an all-embracing community.

To recap: the sound like a violent wind and the tongues of fire are signals of a mighty encounter with God's presence; it's an encounter in which Jesus is fully active, through the Holy Spirit, despite no longer being physically present; it's an encounter which reveals the radically inclusive community that God is forming, of women and men, old and young, of every language and ethnicity; and it's an encounter which fulfils what God had long promised and always intended for humanity. So Pentecost really is something to get excited about.

A prayer

God of signs and wonders, who poured out your Spirit on your Son Jesus Christ; fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit and form us into the radically inclusive community that you always intended for humanity, that as a community we might be a sign of your extraordinary love and power, and that together we might serve as people who welcome others into your kingdom.

Amen.

Art and the Bible Story – The New Jerusalem

Revelation 21:1-5, 9-11, 22-27, & 22:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

Around the table

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Probably by Fra Angelico, Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven; central predella panel, about 1423-4

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Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay

St Martin-in-the-Fields

What do you imagine that heaven is going to be like? In his paintings decorating the altar of the Friary where he was a monk, Fra Angelico tries to capture something of what he imagines heaven to be like. He depicts heaven as a place focussed on worshipping Jesus, the lamb who was slain and who overcame death. Hence Jesus is shown at the centre, with glorious gold light streaming from him. He's carrying a flag with a red cross, not because he wants to show that he's supporting the English football team, but because it's a symbol of having overcome death. And so the scar in his side, and on the palm of his hand are clearly visible.

Sam Wells writes: "For Christians, there's only one thing greater than the overwhelming horror of death: and that's the overwhelming glory of God. ... The Christian hope is that after death we come face to face with the wondrous power and love and passion of God, an experience we could liken to ... a dazzling light: and yet, because of Jesus, that overwhelming glory doesn't destroy us, sinners that we are, but transforms us into the creatures God always destined us to be. After death we face neither the oblivion of physical disintegration nor the obliteration of spiritual destruction but the transformation of glorious resurrection."

Sam Wells identifies three central aspects about what heaven is like. The first aspect of heaven is worship. This is what Fra Angelico focusses on in his painting. Heaven is a place where humans and angels are together giving worship to God, singing God's praises, and making a joyful musical sound. And, as the book of Revelation makes clear, this worship is focussed on Jesus, the Lamb who was slain. This is "the Lamb who gave his life because God loved us too much to leave us to oblivion and obliteration; and the one whose resurrection gives us the life of heaven for which we long, and on which our hope depends."

So heaven is a place where we humans, along with the angels, are lost in wonder, love and praise. Our worship of God is at the heart of what heaven is like. And Jesus is at the centre, at the heart of heaven: so there's no sun at the centre, for, as Revelation put it, "the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." This is what Fra Angelico seeks to capture in this glorious painting.

A second aspect of heaven is friendship. Jesus told his disciples that, "I don't call you servants any longer ... but I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15:15) Heaven is a place where we enter into that friendship, that intimacy which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have with one another. The distance is bridged between us as human beings, and between us and God. Fra Angelico's painting captures the sense of closeness between the worshippers – heaven is tightly packed, and not every face can be made out. But perhaps Fra Angelico misses the intimacy between us and Jesus, focussing more on the glory that exudes from Jesus.

A third aspect of heaven is feasting together. In the stories he told during his earthly ministry, this is the image that Jesus used most frequently to convey what heaven is like. It's a place where a big party, a great celebratory feast is going on. And it's why the Eucharist is at the centre of our worship life in the Church, because that's a foretaste of what we're going to be doing in heaven: we're going to be eating together at a banquet. But this isn't an aspect that Fra Angelico tries to incorporate in his painting: one picture can only tell so much.

A recent BBC TV series, 'Versailles', tells the story of how the French King, Louis XIV, transformed 17th Century France from a country of warring nobles with their own fiefdoms, into a unified nation state. He did it by building the massive palace of Versailles, and developing a cult around himself, as the Sun King, a god-like figure.

The cult involved all the nobles of France living at his palace, and focussing on his every action. This included the privilege – for a lucky few each day – of seeing him rise from his bed in the morning, and being part of helping him to get dressed, in splendid and luxurious clothing. In his court at Versailles, Louis XIV, who became known as the Sun-King, provided a pale imitation of what the true Sun-King, Jesus, the Lamb of God, achieves in the court of heaven, the new Jerusalem.

As the book of Revelation reveals, what Jesus achieves is the unification of all the warring factions of the world, and the healing of all the nations. In heaven there will be no more violence or warring. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. All the tears of hurt will be wiped away from every eye. Death will be no more. Instead we will all be united in our worship of Jesus, the Lamb of God. We will all enjoy an intimacy with one another and with Jesus. And we will find ourselves eating and feasting together. Our deepest longings will be fulfilled. And, as Fra Angelico gives us a flavour of in his painting, we will be overwhelmed by the glory of God.

A prayer

Glorious God, who has revealed your glory to us in your Son Jesus Christ; inspire us to give all of ourselves in worship of you, draw us deeper into our intimacy with you, and bring us to that day when we can feast with you and all the saints to the glory of your name, world without end.

Amen