



North Bedford Church Partnership  
Putnoe Heights Church  
& St. Mark's Church



## Lent Course 2003



The Reverend Dr Joan Crossley

## Introduction

I know that a number of the people attending the course, or following it in their house groups, are long-time worshippers at the Partnership churches, or are members of other local churches. There are also people from the art lecture circuit, who are here to learn more about religious painting. There will be those who are fairly new to faith and are hoping that study will help them on their journey. Whatever our background, we are all here because we are fascinated by the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Even people who despair of the behaviour of some of His followers are agreed that no one has done more to transform the world and its history than that one man. Down the centuries believers and unbelievers have struggled to understand His words, written in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Individuals have encountered Jesus as a living presence in their lives, spoken to Him, loved Him, in prayer and visions.

In the weeks ahead we will be meditating upon Jesus' Passion by using the words of the Gospels, hearing beautiful music inspired by love for Jesus and by looking at works of art which visualise those long ago events.

As a Protestant, I at first found it difficult to use religious images as an inspiration for worship and meditation. After all, it is one of the defining tenets of Protestantism that we should not allow images of God to intervene between our Maker and our souls. But over the last few years, especially since the wonderful *Seeing Salvation* exhibition at the National Gallery in London, there has been a huge demand for lectures about images of Christ in art. People are now willing to use painters' interpretations of Jesus' story, in the same way that we use poets and hymn writers' words to meditate upon Him. Looking at paintings uses different parts of our brains, it helps unlock ideas and feelings and so may enrich our understanding of the Scriptures.

Each week, the course will focus on just ONE work of art. I will set the context for the painting by describing a little about the life and work of the painter. We will hear readings from the scriptures which inspired the work of art, and then we will have

a time for private meditation while we hear some music and I will offer my own meditation based on the painting. Each evening will finish with prayers. The course will offer some questions for discussions in house groups or for individual consideration.

*Joan Crossley*

# Week One

EL Greco, Jesus Driving the Traders from the Temple.  
1600 (National Gallery, London)



## Introduction

The culture in which Jesus was born and educated, Judaism, had a profound resistance to the making of any kind of images. In the early years after Jesus' death, when most adherents to the new religion were Jews, it was unthinkable that portraits of Jesus would be painted. As the faith spread to Romans and Greeks, representations of Jesus were made, not likenesses of His features, but representing ideas about His ministry, for example: there was an early image of Jesus in a catacomb in Rome showing Him as the True Vine. Pictograms, secret symbols such as the fish pun on Jesus' name were also popular. No-one knows what Jesus actually looked like. In the Middle Ages paintings were increasingly used as an aid to understand Bible stories and artists were forced to confront the challenge of representing Our Lord. I think we underestimate the daunting nature of the task. There would always be those who did not approve of the artist's choices, and the penalties for being heretical were very grave indeed. We are going to be looking at four very different

images of Jesus, painted in different countries, at different times. The only real unity between them is a desire on the part of the painter and the people who bought the pictures, to witness their love for Jesus and to proclaim his death and resurrection.

## **About the Artist**

The artist whose work we shall be focussing on this week was a Greek who travelled to Spain and worked there for most of his adult life. Domenikos Theotocopolus (1541-1614) was known to his Spanish contemporaries as simply “the Greek” and so we too call him, “El Greco”. He was born on the island of Crete and began his artistic career as a painter of icons in that ancient tradition. The aim of icon painting was to provide a window through which the faithful could view the Holy. In this period, Venice included Crete in its Empire and in about 1560 El Greco had the chance to go to Venice to further his career. He would there have seen works by the master artists Titian and Tintoretto, and have experienced the marvellous light and colour of their art, so different from his own. By 1570, the Greek artist had moved to Rome where he saw the sculptures and paintings of Michelangelo. He was fascinated by the new style adopted by followers of the dead master who exaggerated the contours of the body, in a style called mannerism. By 1577 he was in Spain and there developed a style of painting completely his own, with the long, attenuated flame like figures, acid colour harmonies, dramatic light and shade. Although many people do not find El Greco’s work beautiful, it is intensely spiritual and powerful. Spain was at the time in the grip of religious fervour. New monastic orders were being founded and there was an atmosphere of passionate religious renewal, with men and women going out into the New World to evangelise. The wealth from the Americas, pouring in through the port of Seville, meant that there was a great deal of money to spend on church building and commissioning works of religious art.

## **Reading: Matthew 21: 1-13**

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.' "

### **About the picture**

The scene is described in just a few lines in the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark and Luke. But the words used to describe the occasion are very similar in all three Gospels, suggesting that it was a vivid memory for all who witnessed the public attack on the Temple. As we heard in the reading, the expulsion of the traders from the Temple occurred just after Jesus' triumphant entry in Jerusalem. Jesus had been hailed and applauded by the crowd, his popularity was at its peak. Yet the next day Jesus did something very disconcerting, He made an attack on the very heart of the Jewish faith and its practices, by staging an assault on traders

in the Temple precincts. El Greco has imagined the events that day. On the far right of the picture, a woman is pottering quietly towards the Temple, preparing to trade as usual. On the right foreground there are a group of onlookers, who we may take to be the disciples and Gospel writers. The kneeling figure in the foreground is gazing up at Jesus with wonderment in a classic pose of thoughtful reflection.

In the left of the picture all is confusion, the bodies of all the figures are contorted and recoiling from the fury. The fleeing traders try and snatch up their goods and make their escape. The figure of Jesus is the only one portrayed full on, He is also slightly larger in height than the other people portrayed. He is also the brightest part of the picture. If you half close your eyes, you can see the way light reflects off the right side of his form. Jesus shines out of the picture.

The Temple is portrayed as a Classical building, based presumably on what the artist had seen in Rome. On the panels set in the alcoves either side of Jesus' head are two scenes from the Old Testament. On the left Adam and Eve are being expelled from Eden. This is symbolic of the Fall of humanity which Jesus is to redeem. On the right panel the scene depicted is Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Bible scholars and theologians were fond of finding stories in the Old Testament which prefigured, or related to the themes of Christ's ministry and Passion. In this case the artist might have been advised by priests that the Expulsion from Eden and the sacrifice of Isaac were appropriate stories to expand on the subject of El Greco's picture. The sacrifice of Abraham's only son, was to alert the reader to the sacrifice of God's chosen Son which was about to be made.

El Greco has not been old-fashioned enough to paint a halo around Jesus' head to point up his holiness. Instead he has placed Jesus against the bright townscape seen through the arch, which has a similar effect in highlighting Jesus, separating Him from the people around Him.

Jesus has entered the Temple through the open archway, bringing the freshness and brightness of the Spring light with Him into the darkness of the Temple. This symbolises the new spiritual order which Jesus will bring to the decadent tradition

of the Temple. Jesus is portrayed as a human dynamo, unclosing like a wound spring, charged with energy, setting off the chain of events which would lead inevitably to the Cross. From this point Jesus would be in conflict with both the Jewish elders and the Roman authorities. Up to this point Jesus had merely been a disturbing teacher and healer. Now Jesus is setting himself against the order of the State and the local religious leaders. The figure gazing up at Jesus is absorbing this fact with horror and admiration. Perhaps he stands in for us, as we are invited to contemplate the scene and its consequences. He is certainly discussing the event with another very aged person.

The painting has extra impact because all the figures are slightly but deliberately distorted. When in Italy El Greco had admired Michelangelo's painting of the male nude torso, and you can see that reflected in the figure with a basket on his head, swaying back from Jesus. The female figure with her hand across her head is also adapted from a Michelangelo sculpture. But the sentiment of the picture, the vitality and sheer passion is very Spanish. The outraged money changers fling out their hands in a circle around Jesus – there are so many hands that it is hard to tell who they belong to.

## **Meditation.**

Although the story of Jesus driving the money-changers out of the Temple is a very familiar one, it isn't very common as a subject for pictures. Perhaps rich people who buy art are not fond of owning pictures which remind us that Jesus had strong views on wealth and faith? The only people who could afford pictures by artists like El Greco were either Churchmen, supported by the rich, or the rich themselves. Jesus was issuing a challenge when he drove the business women and men out of the Temple. Some people like to see this subject as Jesus attempting to rid the faith of the Jews of the corruption which had crept in to it over the centuries. The Temple had gradually become an industry, attracting traders of all kinds, selling creatures for sacrifice, and other commodities.

What can we learn, this Lent, from the theme of Jesus in the Temple? I have recently been to St Paul's Cathedral and found it to be a positive Babel of tour guides, gift sellers and people demanding your money for the privilege of praying in God's house. But I don't read the story as a challenge for you to jump on Thameslink and drive the tweedy ladies out of the Cathedral!

I think that El Greco's picture offers us a useful guide to how we might interpret the scene in the Temple. The Temple can be seen as representing all large institutions, perhaps even our modern Church. It is beautiful, and venerable, but has become confused and corrupted, filled up with accrued traditions which need reassessing and cleansing from time to time.

The figure of Jesus in the picture is a catalyst for change, the youthful, energetic, dynamic leader who changed the world. You can see why the subject is a neglected one in art. This is not a comfortable Jesus, meek and mild, ministering to the needy. Here Jesus is resolute, determined to do what is right, even at the financial and emotional cost of some. This is a difficult aspect of Jesus but one which we should not attempt to ignore. This is the Jesus which demands that we take a stand against injustice, the Jesus who has inspired women and men to fight against slavery, against apartheid, against all injustice, suffering and disease. Unless the people of faith harness Jesus' righteous anger against what is wrong with the world, ours will become a dead religion, observant of ritual but not of human need.

## **Exercise**

Lent is a time to listen to what our hearts tell us might need to be changed, in ourselves and in the world. To the people of Jesus' time, such an attack on the Temple was shocking: many were probably disturbed and disgusted; many probably couldn't see the point of Jesus' actions. Those who seek change and renewal always shock most of their contemporaries. Groups may like to discuss examples of Christ inspired challengers of authority.

## Questions

1. Are we uncomfortable with an angry Jesus ?
2. Is Jesus still challenging those who believe in Him?
3. Is God challenging *the Church* today towards change ?
4. What do we think might make Jesus furious in 2003 ?

## Week Two



Jacopo Robusti (aka) Tintoretto, The Last Supper,  
1591-2 (San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice)

### Introduction

In this course we will only be able to look at a small selection of images of Jesus and the Passion. It is not intended to be a series of lectures on images of the Easter story, nor sermons on the subject. Rather I have chosen works of art which strike a chord in me, paintings which, because of their beauty or unusualness, invite us to ask different questions about the events they depict. The paintings of Tintoretto, a controversial Venetian painter, have a strong quality of drama and passion. He was himself a very spiritual artist, having what we would now call Christian Socialist views about the right of the poor to receive recognition as spiritual equals of the rich. See what you make of this extraordinary image.

## About the artist

Tintoretto, born Jacopo Robusti in Venice in 1518. He gained his nickname from his father's trade as a dyer of fabric. A biography of the artist written during his lifetime by Ridolfi (1642) stated that Tintoretto kept a motto pinned to the wall of his studio, "The drawing of Michelangelo and the colouring of Titian". Tintoretto worked extremely fast, with the kind of artistic dash and bravura strokes which would have made him a favourite with the Impressionists in the nineteenth century but which was heavily criticised by his own generation. He worked directly on the canvas, altering as he went, leaving his works "unfinished" to the eyes of his contemporaries. He, like all major artists of the time, ran a busy studio which was more like an art production line: someone would grind the colours, someone else paint the background, the master would sketch the outlines on the canvas, leaving the most skilled of his apprentices to put in the clothes. The master would then "finish" the picture putting in the heads and key features of the work. It was a well acknowledged method of working and contracts between patrons and artists show that the painters charged more for the amount of the master's touch on the picture. It meant that not only could Tintoretto work fast, he could also sell his works cheaply. So that the paintings of this well established master were accessible to even the poorer churches and guilds in Venice. The artist did a great series of paintings for the Scuola di San Rocco, a kind of religious club which combined rich with poorer members and had a ministry to educate and assist the families of poorer members. The poor appear unusually often in this artist's work, very few of his disciples and saints wear Sunday best clothes. Perhaps Tintoretto was making a point about the democracy of holiness, an idea which might have seemed uncomfortable to some of his rich contemporaries.

## Reading: Mark 14:12-25

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples

asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?" "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."

## **About the painting**

This picture was the last in a series of versions of this subject painted throughout his long life. It was completed within a few years of his death, for one of the most wealthy and prestigious monastery churches in Venice, San Giorgio Maggiore.

Tintoretto's paintings frequently resemble a stage set, with a deep sense of space and various groups acting out different parts of the story. He composed his enormous pictures very much as a stage designer might. We know that he made small models of wax or clay, and dressed them up, as a way of studying drapery effects.

It is a remarkable picture, large though it is, it is painted with loving attention to detail. Notice the realism of the striped cat as it pushes its nose into the basket. In particular, the objects on the table are painted with extreme attention to detail, he has studied carefully the way the carafes of water reflect the objects in the room. This is certainly not a case in which his critics could complain that Tintoretto had worked too fast or too sloppily.

The acute angle of the table and the strong diagonal lines of the floor tiles all lead our eye to Jesus, who is spot lit in a very theatrical way. The light doesn't have an obvious external source but seems to emanate from the Lord's body, or the glowing halo around his head. Jesus is also the most brightly dressed person in the picture, with the drapery of his robe echoing the sleeves of a priest's vestments.

The painting was meant to be hung above an altar so that the communicant kneeling to receive the bread and wine would link their own reception of the sacraments with the disciples being ministered to by Jesus. In some Last Supper paintings artists create an image of an informal supper party, others paint a quasi Roman banquet. Tintoretto makes it quite explicit that he is painting the exact moment of the inception of the Eucharist. Although there is evidence of other foods, the water, wine and bread are the main elements on the table, which is painted in very much the form of an altar.

The disciples are represented in contemporary Venetian dress but are not shown as aristocrats but simple men. Judas, wearing a cap quite unlike the other disciples, is distanced by placing him on the opposite side of the *mensa* (altar/table). On the right hand side of the picture there is domestic detail and a certain level of fuss, on the left all is quiet, harmonious and sacramental. Most unusually the moment of administering the sacraments is accompanied by supernatural activity in the form of strange phosphorescent angels. They swoop down from Heaven concentrating their light and prayers on the sacred moment. Interestingly the artist can't stop painting realistically and has shown the lamp casting its light on the faces and wings of the angels. They are defiantly *there*, a witness to the actions of Jesus and his friends.

## Meditation

Tintoretto was passionately concerned to portray the holy men and women in his art, not as Greek gods and goddesses, but as recognisably real Venetians of his own time. He wanted to create a spiritual link between the Holy within the picture and the world outside looking in. He liked to clothe the figures as poorer people since he believed that faith was for all not just the rich and respectable.

To me this picture speaks about the close relationship between the sacred and the everyday. The first Holy Communion is given while the bustle of life goes on around it. The Holy is not diminished by the mundane, but is part of it. The artist has similarly invited the viewer to think about what happens at the administration, as we take the human-made elements of bread and wine, we link ourselves with the body of Jesus and with Heaven. It is a timeless moment where the eternal and the temporal intersect. Time stands still for that precious moment and we then join with all the faithful who have taken this sacrament before us, and all who will come after us. The painting speaks to me about all these connections: of the earthly with the heavenly, with now and the past and future. It calls to me for a reconsideration of the way we frame the Holy as something that must be carefully segregated away from the lives we normally lead. We wring our hands a great deal about the secularisation of Sunday, maybe we ought to aim for the sanctification of every day? It has always been a puzzle how people who dedicate themselves to God can lead lives of great wickedness. It must be, in part, because they are not harmonising the spiritual part of themselves with all the other parts. They become fragmented beings, with God tucked away where He can't bother them.

The Eucharist is always a sacrament of hope and regeneration. In this painting it represents a drawing together of all elements necessary to the building of the individual and also the Kingdom. Each of us needs to find the integration of the Holy into our working and home lives, each of needs to understand that we live in a heavenly context, shaped and guided by the Spirit of the unseen God.

## **Exercise**

### **For discussion**

Do you think that it is possible to fully integrate the Holy into every day life ? What do you think the problems might be ? Which areas of human life do we typically hivy off from God ? Working life ? Sexuality? Fun ? Is it possible to see God as present in all these aspects of the ordinary ?

### **Questions**

1. Why don't we want God in certain bits of our life ?
2. Is it because we think of God as a judgemental schoolmaster or cross parent who wouldn't approve?
3. Are there any parts of you which you have tried to shield from God's gaze ? It might be worth asking which and why?

## Week Three



Mantegna The Agony in the Garden 1460s  
(National Gallery, London)

### Welcome

If you were not able to attend the first week of the course, you missed me giving a “health warning” to those of you, who like me, have certain scruples about religious imagery. It is, after all, part of our Protestant heritage to be aware that paintings can shape our image of the Unimaginable, in some ways limit the Inimitable greatness of God. But in recent years these anxieties have been lulled. Ours is an age of a multiplicity of pictures, on television, magazines, on computers. If paintings can help us focus on Jesus, then that can only be helpful. But we need to be aware that any picture of Jesus was made by someone who was just a man, living in an era, which in its own way was as blinkered and irreligious as our own. It is helpful to do what we are doing on the course, to look at a number of contending images of Our Lord. As each artist

shares his view of Jesus, we may gain useful insights into some aspects of His perfection and ministry.

We should not imagine that Renaissance artists worked as individualist creators, producing their visions of Jesus in isolation. Images of God were made with the benefit of theological reflection, the well-trying conventions of art and frequently with the advice of clergy. Artistic productions were screened for any theological irregularities and in some Catholic countries, representatives of the Inquisition viewed pictures and weeded out any dubious images.

## About the artist

Mantegna was chronologically the first of the artists we shall be looking at on the Course. He was painting just before the height of the Italian High Renaissance. He was born twenty years before Leonardo da Vinci and forty before Michelangelo. Like all artists in this period, Mantegna learned his craft not by going to art school, but through a rigorous practical training in the studio of an established artist. He was the adopted son of a painter called Squarcione of Padua. Presumably the artist adopted him because he recognised the child's talent and wanted to encourage it and use his talents in the studio. Boys were typically apprenticed at the age about ten and were taught the techniques of grinding colour pigments from stones, preparing canvases, before learning drawing and finally painting. When they were older they could practise by filling in the unimportant bits on their master's picture. Works of art were priced according to the amount of the master's work which had gone into the finished work. Mantegna obviously thought a lot of himself, because at the age of only 17 he fought a notorious court case where he took his master to trial for exploiting him. He successfully severed the legal tie between them and set up as an independent master. Such rebellious behaviour was almost unheard of and suggests that Mantegna had a strong opinion of his artistic importance and individuality. He broke away from the conventions of his teacher and made an intensive study of the human anatomy and classical sculpture. Among Mantegna's most revolutionary works is his **DEAD CHRIST (Brera Gallery, Milan)**. This

poignant image of Jesus still catches our breath with its unconventional perspective. The body is laid out in death, with our gaze travelling up the length of the body, from the feet, placed close to us. There are mourners weeping beside Jesus, but what first strikes us is the deadness of the body. We are confronted with a corpse, whose soul has truly gone through the door to death. Theologically such a picture is important because it affirms Jesus' suffering and death as real and increases the miraculous triumph of the Resurrection. In this very immediate study we gain a sense that the artist had been studying corpses to gain knowledge of bones and sinews to help his painting.

Mantegna's career blossomed. Like most Renaissance artists he married into the business. In his case he married the daughter of one of the most famous artistic families of the day, the Bellini of Venice. He enjoyed a prestigious position as Court Painter to the Duke of Mantua and painted some extraordinarily daring and imaginative room decorations for in the vast palace at Mantua.

Reading: Mark 14: 26-52

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: " 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. 'But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today- yes, tonight-before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same. They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "Are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" 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.

## **About the picture**

The landscape in the picture is so extraordinary as to be almost a character in its own right! In the foreground there is a sculptured swirl of rock. In the background some improbable pepper pot mountains, with jagged edges. And in the middle ground Jerusalem is portrayed as a pretty walled Renaissance city, with church towers and palaces. Of course Mantegna had never been to Jerusalem, although he might have read descriptions written by travellers. He would have heard that the Holy land was dry and rocky and made up the rest. Similarly he hasn't known how to dress Jesus and his disciples, but he had seen sculptures of Roman antiquity and devised a casual toga look of contrasting layers of fabric swirling around the figure. If the chief figures are dressed as Romans, the figures in the background are gaudily dressed in

a motley assemblage of Renaissance high fashion and Roman armour.

The composition is very daring: constructed in the shape of a pyramid, the apex is Jesus' head. The line that runs to the apex, up the dark side of the steps on the left, meets a line that runs up the side of the mini hill. In the background there is another dramatic triangle formed by the peak of the highest mountain. The artist is experimenting with the still fairly new science of perspective, and is able to produce a convincing sense of distance. He makes our eye move where he wants in the picture. The tree on the right hand side is like a stage flat, your eye has to look behind it, creating a feeling of depth and space. Then the eye is led from the base of the tree over the fallen branch and then down the twisty path back into the distance where you see the approaching soldiers. Oddly the colour and vitality of the costumes, makes them appear quite a cheerful and lively group, rather than approaching doom.

The figures of the disciples also demonstrate Mantegna's ability to manipulate perspective. The nearest figure (with his hand clutching a book) lies with his feet towards the viewer and our eye is drawn along his diagonally placed body. The feet of the three disciples fan out like the corners of a triangle.

The passage from St Mark's Gospel is about a very private moment between Jesus and God. We must suppose that Jesus confided his prayer to a disciple, because we are told that the friends who were with Him were found to be asleep when He returned to them. Conveying inward states of mind is a real challenge for an artist. How can you depict a prayer, or a conversation with God, or even a vision? Mantegna has come up with a device showing that Jesus knew what His destiny was to be. Five rather stern angels are shown floating on a cloud, bearing the instruments of the Crucifixion, the Cross, the spear, the nails etc.

The artist hasn't chosen a real looking landscape but a psychological one which reflects Jesus' mind. The Lord was at a crucial moment when He could have rejected His destiny as our Saviour and saved Himself. Instead he Jesus chose the hard and rocky path to death and suffering. His inward sense

of isolation is portrayed in the physical loneliness of His figure as He fearlessly confronts the Cross.

## **Meditation**

In the scene we have looked at today, the story of the Passion has reached a pivotal point. Jesus is shown confronting the fate that God had marked out for Him. This is Jesus at His most fully human. He did not want to suffer. He was not some mad masochist who welcomed torture and suffering. Like us, Jesus could experience pain, and like us, He shrank from it. In His private prayer, He asked God that His death might not be necessary, but submitted Himself to whatever God willed.

It is very comforting to know that, through Jesus, God really knows about human suffering. The Greeks visualised their heartless Gods as puppet-masters, pulling the strings of humans for their own ends and amusements. Our view of human suffering is that, although life can be hard, though there is disease, suffering and loss, God enters into these dark places with us. You may well snap, well if God cares so much, why does He allow these things to happen? I do not know, what I do know is that without the realities of geography, biology and human interaction we would be little more than actors on a film set where it is always sunny and there is no death. We would not be fully human without suffering. But there are two things that our faith offers us to counterbalance sorrow. The first is the loving companionship of God, in the very depth of our pain. The second is the belief that this mortal life is only a preparation for a better life lived eternally with God. It matters intensely how we live our human lives and how we use the privileges and gifts that God has graciously given us.

The Gospel reading gives us Jesus' words when He returned and found His friends sleeping, oblivious to the internal struggle that He had been confronting. "Watch and pray that you might not enter into temptation, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak". As a last message it is a powerful one: we know what we should do, and what God expects, but we fall so far short of God's hopes for us. We are easily distracted by our

personal weakness and by the demands of life. In order to live the Christian life we have to be on the alert, on the watch for temptation. I heard a story about an old lady during the War who could do nothing for the war effort, but resolved to pray endlessly. After the war she was asked if she had had a peaceful time, living in the country, she said, on the contrary, prayer is exhausting. The spiritual life is not one where we can just relax and be contented with ourselves. On the contrary, we should be contending with ourselves. There is always a new personal moral challenge to confront.

In the season of Lent, we are called upon to address our faults and weaknesses. We are hoping that we can rise above them to draw nearer to the perfect happiness that is being with God.

### **Private exercise**

Imagine that you are one of the disciples in the barren Mount of Olives, with Jesus. Imagine that Jesus has drawn away to pray and that you are dozing. As he comes back, you awake. What do you most fear that He will say to you? Or to put it another way, what are you most ashamed of in yourself: a sharp tongue? a judgemental nature ? Are you selfish? Thoughtless ? Lazy? What would Jesus say that you should most guard against in yourself ? Jesus was not a miserable killjoy, but He does want you to draw closer to Him. Sins hold us back from God. Why not own to yourself and Jesus what is holding you back from Him? Know that Jesus is on His way to meet you, but can't properly embrace you until you repent and hold out your arms to Him.

### **Questions for group work**

1. What do you imagine to have been Jesus' thoughts when He saw that His friends had been sleeping?
2. How do you think God feels about human failure?
3. Do you think that there might be a difference in the way God contemplates individual and collective weaknesses?

## Week Four



Peter Paul Rubens, The Descent from the Cross  
1611-14 (Antwerp Cathedral)

### Introduction

If you watch people as they walk around art galleries, they typically rush past Crucifixion scenes. They either find them too violent or too painful or perhaps incomprehensible. Some images of Jesus on the Cross show Him looking so clean and relaxed that you might imagine He was merely perching there. Others depict Jesus as contorted by pain, writhing in suffering. The painting we shall study today was a completely original concept. Like many Catholic intellectuals in the seventeenth century, Rubens had done a form of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. These demanding meditations invited the believer to accompany Jesus on His journey by studying the

gospels and imagining themselves participating in the events described. This intense emotional identification with Jesus and His Passion may have inspired Rubens to paint this subject.

Ignatius wrote. "Imagine our Lord hanging before you upon the Cross. Speak with him of how being the Creator, he then became man, and how, possessing eternal life, he submitted to death, to die for our sins. Then shall I meditate upon myself and ask, "What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ ? What ought I to do for Christ? As I see him in this condition, hanging upon the Cross, I shall meditate on the thoughts that come to my mind. Rubens painted this picture as an aid to the piety of his own age, he believed that painting was what he could do for Christ.

## **About the artist**

Rubens was born in Germany of Flemish parents. At the time of his birth they were temporarily living away from their native Antwerp, then the focus of the bitter religious wars between Catholics and Protestants. The first half of the seventeenth century in Europe was scarred by the conflict between the two religious factions and the struggle for supremacy of Spain and France. Rubens came from a higher social class than was usual for painters, who were typically artisans. His father was a career diplomat and Rubens inherited many of his skills in dealing with the rich and famous. The young Peter Paul went as a court page to an aristocratic lady and was taught manners, etiquette, music and dancing. He was a talented linguist and spoke French, Latin, German, Italian, Spanish, English and Flemish.

To the surprise of his family, Rubens begged to be apprenticed to a painter and showed exceptional talent. He studied hard, became a master and in his twenties set off to study art in Italy, the centre of the cultural world. In that period it was customary for Princes and Dukes to have a court artist, to make portraits of the royal family, to restore pictures and to act as a curator of their art collections. Rubens was

headhunted by the Gonzaga Duke of Mantua. One of the turning points of Rubens' career was a trip to the court of the King of Spain, who was the most powerful man in the world. Rubens was a devout Catholic, hearing mass every day of his life. It was natural for him to lend both his artistic and equally formidable diplomatic skills to furthering the cause of Roman Catholicism against Protestantism. Rubens became an undercover envoy for the king of Spain, visiting key European countries to negotiate peace treaties and alliances, while ostensibly painting portraits. Such was his genius for producing flattering and impressive likenesses, that he was assured of a welcome wherever there was an ambitious ruler. In 1629, Rubens painted for the court of Charles I in England, and in the 1630s painted an outrageously flattering multi-canvas series, giving a misleadingly positive spin on the life of the queen of France, Marie de Medici.

Rubens became political advisor and court artist to the king of Spain's sister, the Archduchess Isabella who was Regent of the United Provinces, in modern day Belgium. He painted *The Descent from the Cross* for Antwerp Cathedral between 1611-14.

Rubens was the most successful painter of his time, receiving countless honours, including a knighthood from the English king. He had vast wealth and accumulated a fine collection of paintings as well as classical sculpture. He built himself a mini palace in Antwerp, where foreign visitors report witnessing him at work in his grand studio. It is said that while he painted, Rubens would also be dictating letters in Italian, listening to a reading from a classical work, as well as graciously receiving guests. Rubens was a man of enormous skill and artistic energy, with a flair for self-presentation!

## Reading: Luke 23: 1-46

Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king." So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no basis for a charge against this man." But they insisted, "He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here." On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies. Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him." "With one voice they cried out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him." But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been

thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will. As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then " 'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" 'For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. " Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

## About the picture

Rubens painted *The Descent from the Cross* for Antwerp Cathedral between 1611-14. It was commissioned by the Guild of Arquebusiers, a Para-military group of socially ambitious middle class men. The patron saint of the Guild was St Christopher, and Rubens made a play on his name by making each of the three panels about Christ-bearing. *Christophorus*, from which the name derived, means Christ-bearer in Greek. We are looking at the central panel of the triptych which measures a huge 165 x 122 inches, and as you can deduce from the scale, it was designed to hang in a very prominent position in the crossing of the Cathedral.

The painting is imagined from a very few phrases in the gospels. It is Good Friday, Jesus is dead and the day is drawing to a close. The grieving disciples are galvanised into action. They must take down the Lord's body and bury it before the start of the Sabbath. If they do not do so, their beloved friend would have to hang in the searing heat until the end of Sabbath the following day. Joseph of Arimathea has offered his own tomb, if only they can get Him down in time.

The handsome, curly-haired man in red is St John. He is the principal bearer of the weight of the body. The body is in transition passing down from Joseph of Arimathea, the figure in the turban. At the top, reaching over the cross bar is a figure clutching Jesus' arm, whom I have always read as St Peter. So the weight bearers are arranged in a triangle across the large canvas.

The women who had waited with Jesus are at the foot of the Cross. Mary, mother of the Lord, is red-eyed with weeping and pale with grief. It was theologically important to show Mary as being upright and brave in her suffering. The two other women, Mary Cleophas and Mary Magdalene provide a youthful contrast with Jesus' mother. All the participants in the picture are spot lit by an unseen, powerful light source. There is a strong band of brightness across the diagonal made by Jesus' winding sheet.

Jesus looks very dead indeed. His body has turned a horrible blue colour and is contorted. It was very important to depict Jesus as dead, for cynics might deny the truth of the Resurrection by claiming that he had not died but merely fainted. Rubens, who worked closely with theologians, has reinforced the faith of his viewers by showing a very realistic corpse. Although the subject is sombre, the picture, enlivened by the rich, cheerful reds in the clothes of Joseph and St John. I wonder if the red of John's coat is reference to the blood which Jesus had shed? Certainly the colour is picked up in the blood still trickling from Jesus' hands and feet. The golden hair of Mary of Magdala, gives a bright, glamorous note. There is a very poignant contrast between the soft, flowing hair and the Lord's dirty, wounded foot which rests on her shoulder.

## **Meditation**

It might seem natural for us now to think about Jesus' sufferings, as Ignatius invited his readers to do when contemplating the Crucifixion. But Rubens has chosen to create a very striking image, which leads the viewer beyond the actual Crucifixion into the days before the Resurrection. We are seeing some of those who loved Jesus at the very depth of their sorrow. Yet the painting is not unrelievedly gloomy, there is beauty and hope here. The picture speaks to me about the gifts that God sends us even in the darkest times of suffering and despair.

The first thing that strikes us as we look at the picture is the diversity of the group assembled around Jesus' body. There are the younger women, golden and tear stained, frightened but unflinching. There is Mary His mother, tenderly reaching out to claim back her Son. There is the very prosperous-looking Joseph of Arimathea, exotic in his damask gown and turban. His beard is carefully combed and neat. He provides a strong contrast with the two working men at the very top of the cross. One is burned a deep brown from labouring in the sun, his companion is gnarled with work and age. This person who may, as I have said, be St Peter, is passionately engaged in the task. The desperation of the rush to retrieve the Lord's

body is best expressed in his clutching hands. I love the way he is gripping the winding sheet in his teeth to prevent it slipping. Peter had bitterly wept after denying the Lord three times. Perhaps his desperation is part of his longing to atone for his betrayal?

The chief impression I get from this picture is the unity of purpose of all the figures. They are interlocking, forming a strong diagonal block from the top right to the bottom left of the picture. The horrible and heart-breaking job of burying the Lord is made bearable by their mutual love and trust.

One of the greatest sources of solace, especially in dire straits, is loving companionship. The most comforting of all is the companionship of those who share many of your spiritual beliefs and values, people who can support you and build you up in times of trouble. If we look back at the picture we see that each figure, as well as being quite individual, is reacting differently. But they are united and work in close cooperation. This painting therefore is about the Church, it is every church, a combination of diverse individuals who are willing to subsume their differences in mutual love for Jesus. As a church we are continually challenged by the conflict between our personal perspective and those of others. How can we forge a church from contending beliefs? All Christians are prone to believe that there is only one right view, which, naturally is their own. They have a dangerous tendency to impute their own prejudices to Jesus, at times straying ludicrously far from anything that Jesus could have expressed a view on. Fortunately, Christians are not just about what they believe, but how they live the faith they share. Ignatius challenged his readers to ask, not what they believed about Jesus, but what they had done for His sake. In the same way that all Jesus' friends had a part to play in His descent from the Cross, so all believers are united in the task of building His kingdom on earth. This responsibility cannot be placed upon the shoulders of the few by the many. The job of being a church belongs to all. The making of flower arrangements, the typing of rotas, the organising of finances may not seem to be heroic tasks like saving souls, but they contribute to the building of a community of Christian worshippers, which will go on into the future. Co-operation and

self-giving will be rewarded by the gaining not only of God's companionship, but of the whole Christian community.

## **Exercise**

It is very soon the time of year when annual meetings are being held in churches. Is your church working together harmoniously on the tasks which confront it?

1. Is your church working together? If it is not, what is hindering the spirit of devoted concentration that we see portrayed in the painting by Rubens?
2. Is it time to ask yourself, what am I doing for Christ, what ought I to do for Christ?
3. Is God calling upon you to play a more active part in His service or are you being challenged to be one of those who looks on prayerfully?