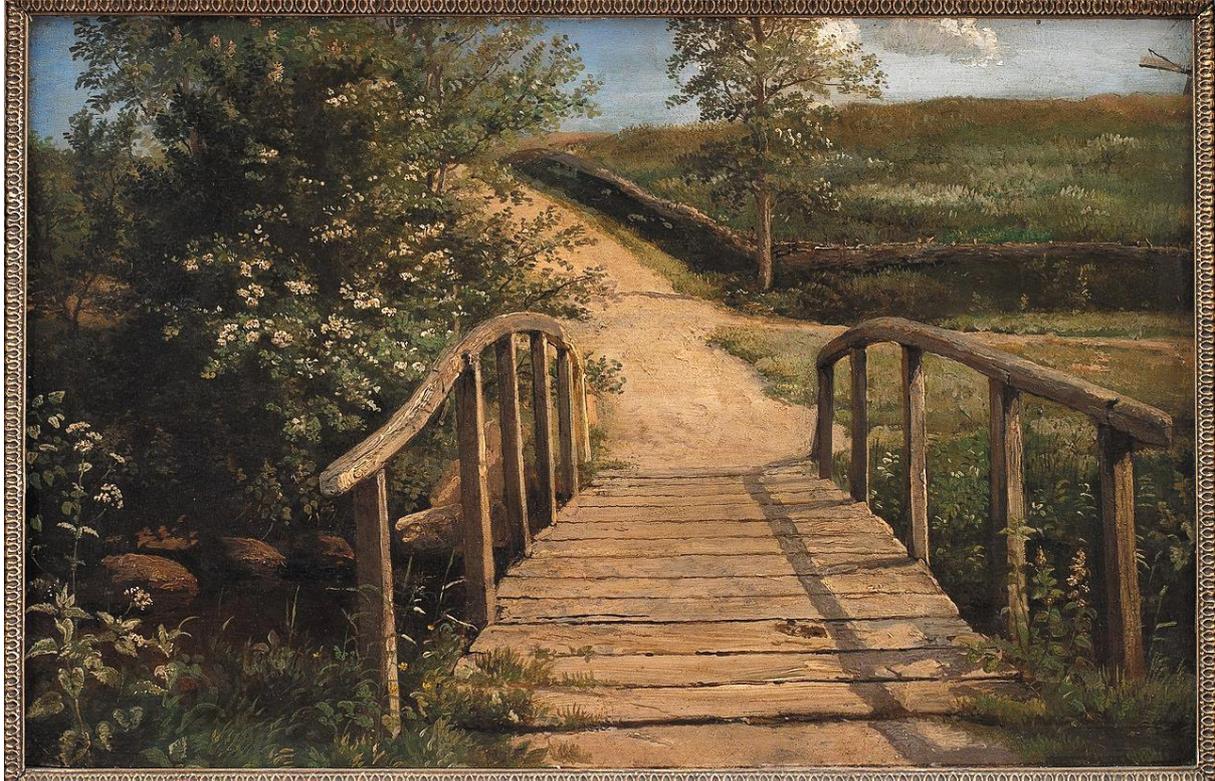


# WAITING IN PRAYER

## in the season of the Ascension



Dankvart Dreyer, Footbridge over a brook in Assens, Funen, 1842, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark

Wikiward/Public domain

### Welcome to Waiting in Prayer

Ascension Day is on 21 May this year. We can read the accounts of the ascension of Jesus in Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-14. In both of them the apostles are told to prepare for the gift of the Holy Spirit by spending time together in worship and prayer.

Down through the centuries Ascensontide has become a time of reflection and prayer to prepare for the approaching time of celebration on Pentecost Sunday. Nine days of prayerful waiting for God to arrive.

Over the past four years a global prayer movement called Thy Kingdom Come has grown up. It has reached 172 countries. It invites Christians around the world to pray from Ascension to Pentecost. There are three declared aims: to deepen our own relationship with Christ; to pray that others may come to faith in Jesus; and to pray for the empowerment of the Spirit, that we might be effective in our witness.

This year we are offering a pattern of prayer for this season of prayer. We are calling it *Waiting in Prayer* and we hope it will help us all in this time of COVID 19 pandemic.

Over the following nine days, that will take us right up to Pentecost, we will offer a painting which we will reflect upon and to serve as a prayer-prompt. Each day emphasises what is needed when we seek to wait in prayer.

Usually when Christians look at works of art whether they are, historic or modern, famous or little known, they use them to illustrate a given biblical text or preconceived ideas. We are attempting to come from the opposite direction - from art to faith. We are wondering how our faith can be enlightened by what we see in the work of art. Or putting it another way we are trying to let God speak sacramentally through the divine image in all human creativity and not solely through an authorised text or sanctioned tradition. It is faith as seeing before faith as knowing.

We begin with a little-known painting from the Danish 'Golden Age' – a time in history when that nation began to forge a distinctive sense of identity and of place. Dreyer painted for the most part around Funen, his island home, a number of the landscapes share with this work a quite unusual compositional quality. The viewer is standing in the place of the artist, we have stopped (as it were) at a footbridge over a brook, the wooden bridge and the lane beyond are bathed in warm golden sunlight, the stream is cast in shadow.

Dreyer showed great early promise, he rose briefly to prominence, before falling out of favour. By the age of 30 he had abandoned art. His bequest amounts to paintings of, for him, familiar landscapes, which appear enigmatic. Perhaps this reflects his own self-doubt and the prevailing circumstances in his native land ("The country had been at war, and with catastrophic results. The ancient union between Norway and Denmark had been shattered. The economy was in a shambles. The rich grew richer and the poor poorer." Henrik Bramsen's introduction to *Danish Painting: The Golden Age*, National Gallery exhibition catalogue, 1984).

Turn again to the picture. This painting is an invitation – to cross the bridge, and take the path ... that will lead us to the unknown, the as-yet-undiscovered. We, too, offer an invitation: to prayerfully journey through these days from Ascension to Pentecost.

Here is a prayer to accompany this series.

God of all pathways and bridges,  
help us to know your presence  
as we step into the future;  
guide us into a faith  
which rests in your grace  
and lifts us up  
into the refreshing breezes of your Spirit,  
with the risen and ascended  
Saviour, Jesus the way, the truth and the life.  
Amen.

*This prayer novena was conceived and prepared by **Michael Mays** – Methodist Lay-Preacher and **John Rackley** – Associate Minister in the Market Harborough Methodist Circuit.*

## HUMILITY – 1



Caravaggio, Madonna di Loreto, 1605, Sant'Agostino, Rome

Wikipedia/public domain

According to a contemporary report the unveiling of this painting "caused the people to make a great cackle over it". Few could see beyond the dirty feet of the pilgrim, those that did were troubled that the painting seemed irreverent. For many years, literally centuries, doubts were raised – was this really a religious painting?

Let's take a fresh look. Firstly, we find that the colour palette is pulled back, to the extent that it seems unreal – almost monochrome. Then we discover that Mary is also barefoot. Only the merest halo sanctifies her and the Child. Although beautiful, Mary could be any woman, emerging from a shadowed doorway by a wall of flaking brick. This is unexpected and does indeed push at the boundaries of religious art.

In our world where we are saturated by imagery (salacious and otherwise), we are less perturbed but nonetheless this is rather unexpected; let's look further. Mary is presented in movement, her body twisted towards the pilgrims, the Child, toddler rather than new born, raises his hand in blessing. The visitors are earnest and prayerful, their clothing shows that they are simple folk carrying only the pilgrim's marker of a staff. The man seems to strain forwards, the old woman is adoring, quietly joyful.

So, what are we to see in this? The Basilica della Santa Casa ('The Church of the Holy House'), in the town of Loreto, on the Adriatic coast, remains a pilgrimage site with associations, in legend, to the home of the Holy Family. According to devotional literature from the early 17th century pilgrims journeying to Loreto were encouraged to embark in complete humility. It was important to forgo all earthly pleasures during the journey, to travel, as it were, in poverty and on arrival at the church to circle three times on your knees - that your heart might be open. The artist has carried all of this into his composition. This is a painting that presents before us a vision; the two pilgrims, who have travelled in meekness, are granted sight of their Child Saviour. It is a split-second revelation; the reality of which is their reality, their truth, their hope. Like many of Caravaggio's paintings, the scene is a moment, a camera-flash moment, where everyday folk encounters the divine.

Pilgrimage has, quite unexpectedly, enjoyed something of a revival in recent years. The Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage leading to the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in north-western Spain has become so popular that the routes are becoming overrun; and many of us might travel vicariously through TV pilgrimages. What's more pilgrimage imagery has found its way into popular culture, how often do we hear media pundits talk of 'being on a journey,' or learning to 'travel light'?

Over these next days we are discovering another ancient tradition of devotion as we take a journey in prayer, a pilgrimage of the heart. This may not lead to a moment of total revelation but if we 'walk humbly' we may be changed. A true pilgrimage seeks and enquires. We should not try to prescribe what must happen. One of the lessons that anyone leading a retreat or pilgrimage must learn is not to tell people what they should feel or discover. It is the same when we worship and pray. We must wait with open hands and God the Giver of Life will place in them what we need.

## FAITH – 2



Paul Cezanne, Old Woman with Rosary, 1896, National Gallery, London

Wikiart/public domain

Cezanne was proudly provincial, he inhabited a hinterland between non-conforming urban sophistication and rural life. When he stayed in the country he startled his city friends by going to Mass. In this painting we find a sensitivity towards faith which is rare in late 19th century art.

We see here an old woman, she is bent, her clothes shabby. She seems to stare with unseeing eyes into a fire (the light that illumines her face and hands is consistant with the glow of a hearth). Her large hands are clenched, like those of a bare knuckle fighter, around rosery beads. When we look closely we discover that the rosery is broken.

According to the National Gallery catalogue it was Joachim Gasquet, the poet and writer, who offered a rather colourful account of the sitter, whom he described as “an old nun who, having lost her faith and escaped from the convent, wandered aimlessly until the painter took her in as a servant.” This entry may help with identifying the old woman and locates the painting to Cezanne’s family home near Aix-en-Provence but it’s hard to read into this picture a lack of faith. For my part I see it quite differently.

The introverted eyes, the tense if damaged body shape and the fierce grasping of those beads cry out faith. The rosary is broken, just as she seems damaged; but there is faith here. Dogged, rugged despite-it-all faith. For me this is a painting filled with empathy and sympathy, the tone is dark but she looks to the light; the fists suggest she continues to fight.

The journey of faith is rarely on the spiritual equivalent of smooth tarmac. We travel over rocky ground, climb sometimes, to the heights, or drop into deep gullies, where the ground is heavy, and mud sticks. Sometimes all we can offer to God are the broken remnants of a former devotion like a broken rosary.

If all we have is our isolation and loneliness then this is what we must offer our Lord and wait with the confidence that when things happen to damage the links of our fragile faith chain, we will still be held firm in the unbroken security of his eternal love.

GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT- 3



Willem Kalf, Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar, 1669, Indianapolis Museum of Art

Wikipedia/Public domain

If we were trying to locate the origins of the global economy we may look towards the Dutch Republic. This arose from the confederation of Low Countries states that broke away from Spanish rule in 1581. Within a couple of generations they were to dominate world trade, conquering a vast colonial empire and operating the largest fleet of merchantmen of any nation. The County of Holland was to become the wealthiest and most urbanized region in the world. Their faith was Reformed, slanted towards Calvinism, opposed and sometimes hostile to Catholicism. In this new environment the language of art was transformed.

Let's begin by looking at the content of the image created by Willem Kalf and then consider some translation work. Represented with startling skill we find a seemingly careless arrangement of extraordinary objects (what the modern day auctioneer would call *objets d'art*): a Chinese porcelain ginger jar, a wine glass of finest Venetian work, a glass roemer on an elaborate silver-gilt stand (a fantastical object peculiar to the Netherlands, called a *bekerschroef*), a Dutch silver platter on which we find a half-peeled lemon, a peach with a leafy sprig and a hardstone mounted knife, perhaps of Indian origin. Right at the edge of the tray we find a pocket watch, the cover flipped open. All the pieces are decorously set on a marble shelf draped by a fine Persian rug. The whole is cross-lit, which warms the tone and helps to unify the whole. It is a painting of astonishing 'reality' – full of texture, with the hint of smell and taste (think of that Mediterranean citrus and the ginger spice).

So, are we simply looking at the artist's brilliant recrafting of the finest crafts? Is this a painting that marks the complacent acquisition of the very rich – a far reaching gathering-in of the finest fruits of others labour – or something else entirely?

To answer these questions we must return to the painting and look beyond the beguiling technical realism to see that the heavy marble top is supported only by a single, slender column; the rug is clumsily rucked, leaving the objects insecurely placed; the silver tray overhangs precariously. The expensive imported fruit is going rotten. In short, the whole arrangement is in jeopardy. Everything presented before us is at risk or wasted. This is a picture of misplaced wealth.

We are being confronted with a serious question: what does all this luxury really amount to? How do we treat earthly riches which so are fleeting and precarious? Are they of the same worth as eternal salvation? This still life may not be overtly 'religious' - but it does call to mind scripture:

"Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?' ...

Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth." (Matthew 19:16; 20-21)

The silence of this still life is broken by the sound of a ticking watch, the inevitable passing of time. Centuries later the unanswered question speaks through the quietness. What about you? In what have you invested? Acquisitiveness and generosity are incompatible. This is a painting to challenge us in our prayerful waiting, not to calm us with its quietness, but to disturb and agitate.

## DEEP STRUGGLE – 4



Taddeo Gaddi, *Madonna del Parto*, c. 1340, San Francesco di Paola, Florence

Wikiart/public domain

We like to think of pregnancy as a joyful time. We speak of a mum-to-be as blooming; the well-received news greeted with smiles – there are plans to be made, diets to be suitably adjusted (“You’re eating for two you know”) ultrasound scans and baby showers. Not for all, of course, for some it’s terrifying, in all sorts of ways.

Travel back just beyond the ‘Call the Midwife’ generations and pregnancy was dangerous – the mortality rate was shockingly high for both mother and baby. Part of the appeal of Mary the Mother of Christ to the late medieval world was that she knew and understood – there was an empathetic connection – and it is this that is explored in a particular type of image, known as *Madonna del Parto* (“*Madonna of Parturition*”) in which the Virgin Mary is shown pregnant. Such representations

developed in Italy, mainly in Tuscany in the 14th century, and owed much to Franciscan piety which drew, creatively, on the emotions.

In the small church of San Francesco di Paola in the then poor part of Florence (that bears the name Ortrarno – beyond the river Arno, even today it's the artisans district) we can find this restored and somewhat diminished painting by Taddeo Gaddi, a faithful follower of Giotto, the founding father of Renaissance art.

Taddeo presents his Madonna as a strong, clear-cut figure with almost coarse features and what might be taken as a sharp-eyed somewhat harsh expression, but this is to misunderstand the vocabulary of the artist. You see the narrow almond eyes belong to another tradition, that of the Gothic and as we look more closely, we find that her eyes are focused entirely on the beholder. She holds our gaze: we, the onlooker, have her full attention. The small tight-lipped mouth indicates concentration.

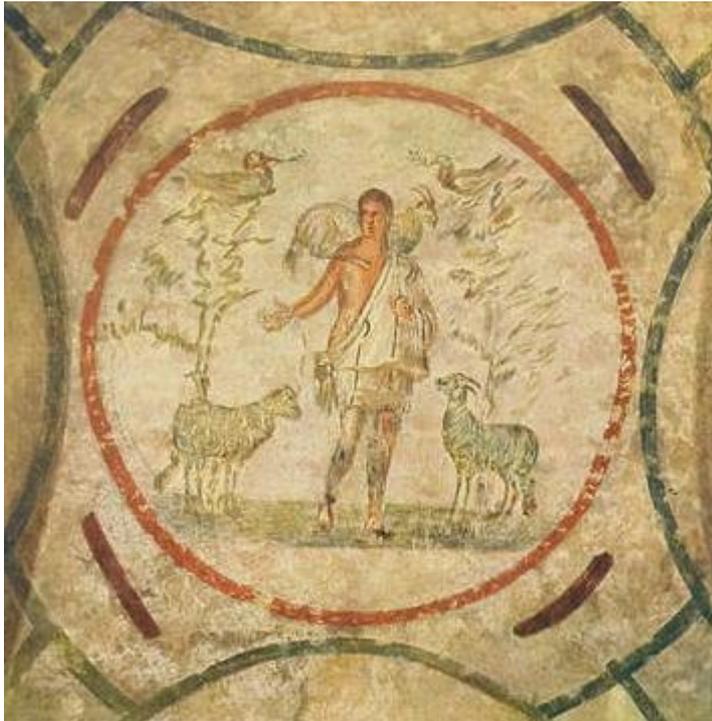
She is heavily pregnant, her garment bulging, her right hand resting against her belly, that most natural gesture familiar to all of us who have watched a loved one who carries a child. In her left hand, she holds a book which we are to understand is a closed bible – the word of God. Here is a visual meeting point, where Word and word come together.

Pregnancy plays tricks with time, in one moment it seems to compress, in the next it seems interminable, never ending. It is an emotional rollercoaster of ups and downs. An inward journey with a very visible consequence. Beyond these most natural emotions I wonder how it was for Mary, this waiting. Was her pregnancy fear-filled, unmarried as she was, unsure of her future? Were their whispered words at the well, pointed words their pierced and stung? Was her visit to Elizabeth a necessary precaution, and her journey to Bethlehem, utterly reckless as it seems, the 'last resort, the safest option'?

However we see it, the saying yes to God left her vulnerable, her time of waiting took courage and that's what we might take from this much damaged and faded fresco – as we wait in prayer. New life, biological or otherwise involves blood, sweat and tears; beyond pain and hardship we trust there will, in the end, be joy.

Earlier in May VE Day was remembered. In one of his wartime speeches Winston Churchill spoke of blood, sweat and tears. Was he aware that he was using the language of the birth-stool? Certainly Jesus used it (John 16:21-23) as did Paul (Romans 8:18-25). There is a time of waiting in disorder and pain – but the future joy waits to be delivered in due time. Prayer can be a sweaty business – God knows.

## SOLITUDE - 5



The Good Shepherd, circa 250, Capella Greca, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome

Wikipedia Commons – photo credit: Joseph Wilpert /Public Domain

A lengthy bus journey away from the historic centre of Rome and, quite literally, off the tourist map you may arrive at the Catacomb of Priscilla. Back in Roman times this was a disused quarry and from the second century onwards was adopted as a Christian burial site. Most visitors, best described as pilgrims, for this in no tourist tick-box location, come to see the "Greek Chapel" (Capella Greca), a square chamber with an arched ceiling which contains 3rd century frescoes interpreted as Christian, although the imagery is perhaps deliberately enigmatic.

At a time when Christians were persecuted for their faith painted imagery was risky. So it was that believers devised means of self-identification by way of sign and symbol – the fish being perhaps the best known (an image which is loaded with layers of meaning, some scriptural, such as the Feeding of the Five Thousand, or the Miraculous Draft of Fish; others sacramental – think only of the saving water of baptism, the font taking the name piscina, or 'fish bowl').

On the vault of the chapel we find a representation of the Good Shepherd and here the painter is talking the language of metaphor. For believers such an image called to mind both the consoling verses of Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want") and the comforting words of Christ ("I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep" – John 10:14), yet the imagery remained ambiguous: clearly understood by the faithful, but less than obvious for those outside the faith (fishermen and shepherds were a staple of Roman pagan decoration).

Although the stories of Christians hiding out in the catacombs have no reliable foundation it is generally understood that the early faith communities gathered in the vaults of their dead,

worshipped there and shared meals. To us this seems odd and rather uncomfortable, but for them much less so, for they clearly foresaw a Kingdom that truly broke through death and offered new life.

So, imagine, leaving the place you call home, some cell or garret in the overcrowded centre of the city, making your way beyond the urban sprawl, along roads filthy with the stench of decay; finding your way to the abandoned quarry, re-clothed now in scrubland and the discarded detritus of city living. You make your way to the tomb entrance, then through the familiar darkness towards this small chamber, lit by cheap terracotta lamps, fuelled with pungent olive oil. Then joining with others who have gathered, sharing bread and wine, looking up to 'see' Christ, a young and beardless man, dressed in the short tunic of the Roman labourer, a worker's basket, satchel-like, by his side. Birds sing in the trees, two sheep look towards him, another he carries, and you take heart: you are not alone is the message, when your strength or your courage fails you I will carry you; I am the Shepherd who won't, ever, let you go.

We live in a world of siren voices, with a cacophony of noise, the static of our electronic age. We too must travel to a place of quietness, to discover an inward stillness, make our own sacramental space and find with inner sight our Shepherd, who still leads, carries and brings safe home.

Where is that place for you?

## SEEKING TRANSCENDENCE – 6



Mark Rothko, No.14, 1960, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, USA

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Rothko, born a Lithuanian Jew, grew up knowing raw fear. His parents, intellectuals with Marxist sympathies, fled to America shortly before the First World War. It was comparatively late in life before the artist, Yale drop-out, artistic free-thinker, discovered himself in the 'Color Field' form.

These large paintings (No. 14 measures 298cm x 268cm) are hard to appreciate in small-scale reproductive form, but they present in real time and in real (gallery) space something of the transcendent. Let me try to explain.

Such paintings, composed of blurred blocks of complimentary or contrasting colours, are entirely devoid of landscape, the human figure, or symbol. The wilfully flat form, removes even the merest hint of illusion (historically the function of art), yet behind this apparently simple expression lies complex thought.

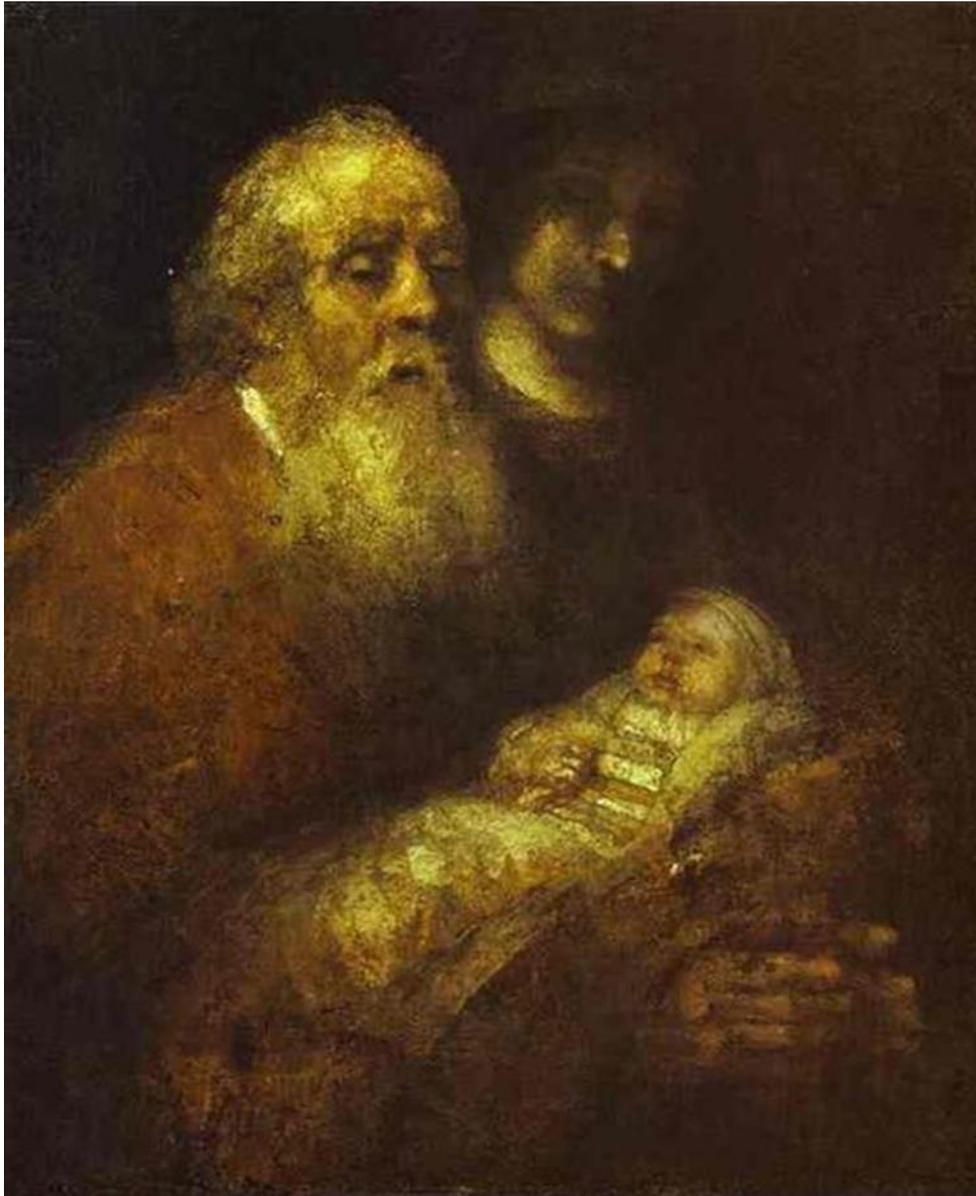
In blocks of pure but uneven colour, without outline, the artist demands concentrated vision, although you have no clear point of focus. If you give it time the result is unsettling, disturbing even: the colours seem to vibrate, you lose your sense of place (is the painting moving, or are you?) and of time (just how long have I been here?). In the end you are "enveloped within" the painting, drawn in by the luminosity of unadulterated colour. In large scale and up close the impact is overwhelming, unequivocal.

In a very real way this is art that destroys illusion to reveal truth (to rephrase Rothko's own words), an art that possesses life force, which is filled with possibility.

This is an art that demands, time, energy and concentration to reach for its meaning. It doesn't always work, but now and then we might get there – in a way it is something like prayer.

Times of epiphany when we know we have been in the presence of God are rare. They cannot be demanded of him. Moments when we rise beyond the everyday can arrive suddenly and disappear with equal speed. We may desire transcendence but this will not come on demand. To have the expectation will not command God into action. Sometimes God knows we are not ready. We need to wait in prayer with concentration, energy and persistence and the prayer on our lips: *Lord I would like to rise very high and borrow your eyes* and when the time is right and in a way that fits us God will answer our prayer.

## LETTING GO - 7



Rembrandt, Simeon in the Temple, 1669, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Sweden

Wikiart/public domain

As a young man in his prime Rembrandt had turned to the subject of Simeon in the Temple (Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands), this earlier work looks like it is set in the scenery of a great opera, the figure group dwarfed by fantastical architecture. It is all very grand, but for me, emotionally stunted. At the end of his life he returned to the theme, carrying with him an old man's wisdom; a life reshaped by sadness, loneliness and loss.

It is said that the painting is in ruinous condition, having been 'restored' centuries ago and finished by another hand (the shadowy figure of Anna is a later addition) but it retains power, authenticity

and authority. Perhaps, when all is said and done, this material needs the 'end of life' perspective; perhaps this has to be the final canvas.

What we see before us is a man with unseeing eyes, who supports, rather than holds, a new born. His hands aren't wrapped around the child, but project, almost in an attitude of prayer. The canvas is so heavily worked (paint on paint on paint) that the facial definition is no longer clear, as if the body is at the point of dissolving, the mouth is half open and we sense the words forming, no more than a whisper, that we must strain to hear:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation." Luke 2:29-30

This is a painting born of patient waiting, this is not so much a scene of tenderness but of fulfilment, release and hope.

We may lament that the canvas is not as Rembrandt left it, but there's enough - enough to know that this man, apparently blind has seen salvation; that this life already turned towards God can let go of this world and fall into grace.

May we in our waiting sense this grace; and, at our parting, let go into His loving care.

Luke, in his gospel's description of the Ascension tells us that Jesus 'withdrew' from his disciples. No going up into the sky but just a simple stepping away and into what they could not see. It was a way of dying that can be witnessed in homes, hospitals and hospices today. The departing are going on their way. As their senses decline and they no longer respond as they once could – this 'letting-go' prepares them to withdraw from this life. There is longing for what has been. There is a desire to cling to what was grand and wonderful but that is not the end to which we journey in this life. We withdraw and as this life closes so another is born and the prayer is answered: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

## DAILY OFFERING – 8



Diego Valezquez, Water Seller of Seville, 1620, Apsley House, London

Wikiart/public domain

Painted in his native Saville when he was still very young, Valezquez took the picture with him when he was summoned to Madrid to work for the king. It eventually found its way into the Spanish royal collection; it was stolen by Joseph Bonaparte at the time of the Napoleonic wars and 'won' by the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Vitoria. A curious and blood-stained provenance for a painting of quiet stillness.

As we draw towards the end of this series, we behold a painting which appears to have no religious substance ... and yet.

We have before us an astonishing picture with a near photographic realism, and it has been this extraordinary rendering of the mundane that singled this work out. The still life detail is compelling: the droplets of water that cling to the earthenware flagon, the potter's markings on the wall of the vessel, where the pot was turned on a wheel, the dimpling of the smaller pot, and the clouding of the glass goblet, rendered with jewel like beading on the bowl. This is exquisite art – art as artifice, but it isn't what this painting is about.

In the western world the gift of water is taken for granted but in so much of the world it is, sadly, another story. Water is, for many, a scarce resource just as it was in Andalusia four centuries ago. Water sellers would fill their large earthenware bottles at the public fountain, load them into wooden frames, to be carried by mules. This was poor man's work, hard labour offering little reward.

Let's return to our painting, and begin by observing the significant absence: there is no indication of payment here, nothing to suggest this is transactional. Look first at the water seller. He is old, fallen jawed, downward looking, his torn leather smock not unlike a chasuble. He is presented in profile, left hand resting on the water jar, his right hand holding the base of the goblet, as the celebrant would hold a chalice. The boy, serious and silent, wraps his fore-finger around the stem, but the glass remains in the control of the old man, the light plays through the glass and reveals a fig.

Now the fig has functional purpose here, as a perfumer intended to make the water taste fresher (something still done in Seville today, apparently). But it also has scriptural significance. If we turn to the Parable of the Budding Fig Tree, we may call to mind Jesus words "... you know that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:29-33). Perhaps at this point we begin to see the painting differently, to detect that within the ordinary, we might find the sacred. We are coming to see, as it were, a secular sacrament.

There is ministry here, with a firm scriptural foundation:

"Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward." Mark 9: 41

And for us, here and now, a pointer, a marker along the way. We are called to make a sacrament of our lives – in the small acts, the kindnesses given, the quiet sharing, in the offering of self. In all there is 'Kingdom come' value and in doing small acts we are not alone – for the promised Spirit rests upon us, all.

## TOWARDS THE LIGHT – 9



Thomas Gainsborough, *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, about 1756, National Gallery, London

Commons Wikipedia / Public domain

We conclude our series by returning home, to England – Gainsborough's double portrait was painted in Ipswich, Suffolk – to explore the familiar, the common experience of family. It is a painting that makes a connection, captures, with warmth a fleeting moment and holds secure the transitory.

The picture, which isn't quite finished (although Gainsborough was prepared to blur the boundaries), predates the artist's fame and fortune, and is one of six double portraits of his daughters, Mary and

Margaret. Both children are spot lit, the unfiltered white light falling from the left. They are dressed respectively in 'Naples' yellow and ivory with a silvery hue, the sheen of the silks reflects this unseen light, which contrast with the darkness of the background. The younger child, Margaret, stretches out to a butterfly, which rests on a thistle, her body moves instinctively. Mary is also in motion, but she is more measured, careful even, and she seems to look outside the picture space, towards the light.

This painting 'works' on all sorts of levels: it is at once a father's careful representation of his two precious daughters, marked with something of their quite different personalities (the impulsive, perhaps impetuous, younger child and the cautiousness of the older); and measures out in paint, the first steps towards independence. It may not be found in a good parenting guide, but those of us who have 'been there' know that parenting leaves us with a gentle aching in the heart: we can't anticipate the last time a child will reach out for our hand to cross the road; our children grow, inevitably, away from us.

But let's not tip over into sentimentality, instead we must return to the painting, for there is more to say as we reach our conclusion. The picture is, essentially, a nocturne, a night piece. There is a hint of grey-blue in the sky but this is no more than the shading we might discover near the summer equinox, the landscape is wild, nature untamed. The butterfly, a diurnal creature that one would expect to hide at night, becomes not so much a symbol of the transitory as a distraction - drawing Margaret towards the thistle bed. Yet Mary's hold of her sister is firm and her gaze remains fixed on the light. The children are moving towards this light when a sudden breath of air, prevailing from the very same direction, lifts both shawl and pinafore.

As we reach the threshold of Pentecost we must wonder how much activity we really want of God. The butterfly like the Holy Spirit is tantalising, attractive, immune to the thistle's hurtfulness. For she invites us to go beyond the "thorns and thistles" (Genesis 3:18); and draws us toward the Light of Light which shines from the darkness which cannot overcome it.

With eagerness the disciples waited in Jerusalem for the arrival of the power from on high. It was not a time for carefulness or caution. Their prayer was deep and full of longing. The centuries have taught us that the faith that follows Christ can get people into all sorts of inconvenience. But the activity of God will not be measured by common sense or caution. We are called to be as little children expectant and fascinated by the Spirit's breeze and trusting that God for our future.