



21 February 2010  
The First Sunday in Lent  
Choral Evensong  
Exodus 33 vv. 12–23  
Colossians 1 vv. 9–20

## Images of Christ



### Salvador Dalí: The Sacrament of the Last Supper

By Max Kramer

‘He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created; things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.’

I wonder how you reacted to this painting, Dalí’s *Sacrament of the Last Supper*, when you first saw it. For me it was a mixture of shock and intrigue. Shock because I thought I knew what the last supper looked like. Informed perhaps as much by the iconic image by Leonardo da Vinci as by the accounts in the gospels and my own imagination – I saw the last supper as a scene of motion and drama. Conversations, betrayal, indignation, eating, whispers, this was my mental picture of that meal.

But Dalí’s picture seems far removed from all that human chaos. His anonymous disciples, buried in prayer, kneel in their symmetrical stillness around a Christ who confidently gestures towards the poised translucent torso that floats in perfect balance above his head.

Now that shock might well have led me to reject Dalí’s painting at a first glance, as many subsequent critics have done, as a work clearly skilfully executed but lacking the very drama which is at the heart of the Gospel.

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But Dalí's work would not let go of me quite that easily: the symmetrical structure drew me in towards the centre, towards Christ. The background landscape attracted me with its luminous beauty, the puzzling suspended torso held my attention and the stone table is so arranged that I felt drawn into a space that seemed left empty for me, at the heart of the symmetry, facing Christ. I was not only shocked, but intrigued.

And it's as we stay with this painting, as we allow ourselves to enter into the place prepared for us at the table that we find ourselves noticing more and more features which intrigue and, I think, can inspire us.

First of all, we notice that the symmetry of the painting which we might at first reject as being *unrealistic* is no casual affair. The very dimensions of the canvas are chosen according to an ancient mathematical ratio called the golden section, used in art and architecture since classical times. The whole scene is surrounded by the mathematical form of a precisely executed dodecahedron. The disciples are arranged in symmetrical pairs, even the bread is broken symmetrically around the central figure of Christ. The very formal construction of this work is clearly not supposed to be part of the background, part of the framework upon which a drama is hung, but it demands our attention as part of the foreground, part of the message of this painting.

The letter to the Colossians, from which we heard this evening, gives us, I think, some clues as to what this formality of composition might mean. For our reading begins not with a description of the chaotic human story of Christ's incarnate life, but with a description of Christ's eternal being as God and his role in the creation of all things, 'in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things go together.' (Col 1.16-17)

What Dalí is drawing to our attention by his stress on formal composition, if we allow ourselves to be intrigued by his painting, is that the figure in the centre, Christ, is not merely human but human *and divine*. The Last Supper is not merely a chaotic human drama, but a revelation of God himself, come among us as man. The fact that Christ, sitting as he does at the heart of all that geometry and symmetry, holds together the very structure of the painting, is Dalí's artistic way of representing Christ's holding together of the universe as God, its divine creator. As he draws us deeper into his painting, Dalí challenges us to see through his work the Last Supper as not only an event in human history but as a divine event of eternal importance: the moment of institution of a sacrament which will for ever bring into harmonious union God and man, heaven and earth.

Yet this is not all. As we look closer we see the dawn light breaking through into the composition, breaking through, across the table to exactly the point to which we are drawn. Dalí's vision of Christ is not to see him as some kind of cosmic given as neutral and abstract to us as the laws of physics but as the bringer of light. The longer we spend with this image, the more we realize that the light is not only breaking for the praying disciples but it is breaking for us. The more that we allow ourselves to be drawn into the painting towards Christ, the more we find ourselves enlightened by the good news and the hope that he brings.

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But what is it that we are being drawn towards in seeking after that light? For while the formal arrangement of the painting draws us towards Christ himself, Christ's bold hand-gestures lift up our eyes to rest on the massive, headless torso which arcs over the entire scene.

At first, with most critics, I thought that this was an image of Jesus' risen body. But the longer I spend with this image, the more I wonder here whether we do not have something rather more striking. Christ's gesture, pointing to himself and to the torso, seems to me enact the words of John's Gospel, 'do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?' (Jn 14.10)

Here we seem to have a bold artistic statement of that notion that we find in the creation story that man is made in the image of God – so even God the Father can be depicted in the image of man.

In fact, even the lack of a face on the torso seems significant, an allusion, perhaps, to the story of Moses who, in our reading tonight, was not allowed to see God's face. For, unusually for Dalí's religious paintings we *are* allowed to see Christ's face, suggesting that the fullness of God, the wholeness of his being, what Moses was not privileged to see, we do see in the face of Jesus Christ. This mysterious and transcendent God who created the universe is fully revealed in the incarnate life of Jesus, in him nothing is kept back, nothing is inaccessible.

In gazing upon Jesus we find the satisfaction of the longing of the Psalmist who sung, 'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.' (Ps 27.8-9a)

And if this is true, if Jesus is pointing to the Father here, then the painting takes on a deeper meaning for us. For the apparent stillness of the painting is balanced by Jesus' gesture of movement. As we are drawn closer into the painting, as we move closer towards Christ, we are not drawn to him alone but drawn into the eternal movement of love in the Holy Trinity. As we move deeper into the painting we are drawn upwards, reaching a centre that is not still but a constant movement: we are ourselves drawn into the dance of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But Dalí does not only depict what it is to which we are drawn, he indicates *how it is* that we can be drawn into the glory of this life of God. His painting leads us, draws us, to make a response.

The place prepared for us at the table, the place where we will be enlightened is not a place where we can stand or sit, both of those gestures would spoil the whole symmetry of the work and block the sight of Jesus, it is a place where the only correct posture is to kneel.

For it is by kneeling in prayer that we can share in the fellowship of Christ's praying disciples, it is by kneeling in prayer that the light of Christ will fall upon us, it is by kneeling in prayer that the gifts of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine that we see set on the table are offered to us, gifts which, so the centripetal force of the painting's symmetry suggests, will draw us ever closer to Christ and through him into the love of the Trinity.

Dalí's painting, for me, is a painting that is designed to be a great metaphor for the journey of faith that we seek to renew this Lent. While da Vinci's work is more instantly appealing, that appeal is perhaps slightly dangerous. The hustle and bustle of da Vinci's scene allows us to look at it simply as an excellent illustration of a purely human scene. But Dalí's work will not allow us to do this.

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Like faith, if we are not to reject it as an historical phenomenon alone, the very strangeness of Dalí's painting demands that we spend time with it. As with faith, we cannot somehow examine it at a distance but must allow ourselves to be drawn in, allow ourselves to be illuminated, allow ourselves to be puzzled, allow ourselves to move towards the God whose life is fulfilled in the constant movement of the Trinity.

And when we begin to do this we realize that the story that we are looking at is not a merely human story at all. The life, Passion and death of Christ, are not simply the terrible features of a brutalized human's life, nor are they simply a historical expression of the universal problem of human suffering, but they are, so the Christian faith proclaims, the story of God.

The more I reflect on it, the more I realize that the shock I first felt when seeing this painting, was nothing other than the shock of faith. The shock that in this man despised, rejected and tortured to death, God revealed himself. The shock that this man, Jesus Christ, revealed to us the fullness of the creator God, his love, his wisdom and, paradoxically, his power.

But Dalí encourages us to do what surely must be our Lenten discipline – not to reject this shocking assertion of the Christian faith, that God became man, but to spend time with it, to allow ourselves to be drawn, in prayer and through the sacraments, more deeply into the light, more closely towards Christ, and more fully into the life of the Trinity.

So Dalí's work leaves us not with an illustration of history but with a challenge for now. Will we this Lent find the time, find the commitment, find the love, to take our place, kneeling in prayer, at Christ's table to see in his light the face of God?