



24 May 2015
The Day of Pentecost
Choral Evensong
Ezekiel 36 vv. 22–36
Acts 2 vv. 22–38

Realities

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Every now and again one encounters something in the world of art that stops you dead in your tracks, and two of such as these I bring to you today, with the understanding that what I find arresting and moving may well leave you utterly cold or at best indifferent.

The first is Leonardo's 'Madonna of the Rocks'; it was commissioned as an altarpiece for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in Milan in about 1483, when Leonardo was just thirty years old. Andrew Graham-Dixon suggests that the inspiration for the setting for this painting might have originated during one of Leonardo's journeys into the mountains of northern Italy, for Leonardo writes in his notebooks of his wonder at the dramatic scenery that he encountered there. In 1480 he wrote: 'Drawn by my eager desire, I wandered some way among gloomy rocks, coming to the entrance of a great cavern, in front of which I stood for some time, stupefied and uncomprehending such a thing...Suddenly two things arose in me, fear and desire: fear of the menacing darkness of the cavern. Desire to see if there was any marvellous thing within.'

Within the painting there is indeed a 'marvellous thing within.' And here our journey begins. There are assuredly times in all our lives, unless we are cocooned within permanent layers of reality-excluding cotton-wool, when we find ourselves in places that seem threatening, rocky, insecure, places where we find ourselves way out of our 'comfort-zone.' Our challenge is sometimes to work out how to react. Do we curl up in a ball, hedgehog like, and wait for the threat, discomfort, anxiety to pass, or do we reckon that this new challenge may lead us to fresh understandings of ourselves and the world around us? It is in this landscape of rocks and water that we stumble upon this scene of astonishing tranquillity and beauty. It is framed within an unfriendly landscape, one that offers little in the way of comfort. Yet it is here, among the rocks, that we meet the Virgin and Child, she, a figure of the gentlest and most embracing warmth, her hand round the shoulder of the young John the Baptist, and her other hand raised in benediction and protection over her own child, with the archangel, Uriel, I believe, looking directly at us, and pointing to the infant John, inviting us to listen to his prophetic words concerning Jesus. There are two versions of this painting; in the later painting, the one now hanging in the National Gallery, the archangel is not making eye contact, and is not pointing towards the child. It's a small but telling detail. But in both pictures, it is the tenderness of the Virgin that I find so moving. It's true, of course, that the rocks are formulaic, the landscape is fantastical, yet the wonder of serenity and humanity of the Virgin who occupies the dead centre of the painting, is overwhelming. This is a world of unforgiving rocks, of winding uncertain paths. True, there are plants and some water, but it is not a world of rich brocades and sumptuous fabrics. It is essentially hostile. Ezekiel reminds us that God is preparing to sprinkle clean water upon us. Here there is water aplenty; some in the foreground, more in the vast expanse of water in the background. We are told, further, that God intends to exchange our hearts of stone for hearts of flesh. This painting is predominated with rocks, with mountains, but, more important is the sight, right at the front of the picture, of the Word made Flesh, the infant Jesus represented as a moderately well-upholstered child.

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In a world where we encounter daily the horrors to which refugees are subjected, journeys of the greatest risk undertaken, simply because the alternative is too appalling to contemplate or because they have been forced from their homes and are now living, if that's the right word, as global refugees for whom no-one, it appears, is keen to take responsibility or interest, this may come as both a calming and reflective painting but it is also one that challenges and awakens. For while there is no comfortable place within sight, there is a way out of the rocks, a path that leads to more mountains, to more uncertainty perhaps, but to a wonderful place of translucent light. I can't begin to describe the beauty of the light of the further landscape shown here – it is of an utterly beguiling blue, a translucent and irresistible colour. And it encourages us to think that we need not stay in this inhospitable place, despite the comfort that the people in it portray, but that there is further to journey, towards the light that beckons us onwards.

The other piece of art that I've chosen simply could not be more different. It is 'The Tortured Christ', a lifesize sculpture by the Brazilian artist Guido Rocha, exhibited at the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975. To say that it is shocking comes nowhere near the reality. When so many paintings and sculptures of the crucifixion portray the crucified Christ as a figure who is enduring the horrors of his death with an expression of stoic calmness bordering on indifference, this comes as a kick in the guts. We have a painting in King's, a work of the Italian master Siciolante, of the deposition from the cross which, while it strongly portrays the grief and desolation of those standing around, and the dead weight of the body, suggests that Jesus had been fastened to his cross with little more than drawing pins, so understated is the brutality of the scene. No such risk here. The body is reminiscent of a victim of the Nazi holocaust, starved, skeletal, wracked with pain and screaming. The hair deliberately depicts someone with no European connections, but rather someone of Afro-Caribbean roots, and, by implication reflects the desperation of many Latin American priests who struggled to minister to those who have no voice, the poor, the unemployed, the street-children, the 'disappeared'. Under the military dictatorship of Brazil at the time, Archbishop Helder Camara said, 'When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why the poor were hungry, they called me a communist.' Rocha was imprisoned and tortured, having been falsely accused of trying to subvert the state, and after his release sought asylum in Chile, only to face imprisonment there as well. He died in Switzerland in 2007.

When we talk about the cross in rather abstract terms, what are we thinking of? When we say that we lay our prayers and our petitions at the foot of the cross, what is in our minds? What image do we have of the man on the cross? The great triptych of Matthias Grünewald in Colmar depicting the crucified Christ as a leper comes nearer than most to the reality of that scene. Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ' makes a determined effort through scenes of appalling violence to get to the heart of the grimness, but it becomes very evident that he is relying heavily on the skills of the make-up team, and his lighting designer is recognisably more influenced by 'Braveheart' than by Golgotha.

It's not just the pain expressed by the crucified Christ, although, God knows there's enough of that. It's also the fury, but the fury at what? Injustice, cruelty, corruption? Can there ever have been times in our lives when we want to express something of the same violence and raw passion? Why not? There is nothing left in this Christ. All has been wrenched from him, all but the pain and the rage. Is the fury directed at us? At our inability or, more probably, our refusal to take action where we see human rights violated or at best ignored on a daily basis. We can turn aside, priest-like on the Jericho road, and choose not to get involved, or we can respond to this fury and act.

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There's another strange and unusual aspect of this sculpture – in a crucifixion sculpture the body is more normally portrayed stretched out on the cross. Twisted sometimes, but generally speaking hanging helplessly. Here there is a fierce and passionate hunching of the body. It is almost as though Jesus, as a final act of desperation, is about to launch himself off the cross, nails permitting. It is as though his scream is one of defiance as well as rage. 'There is more to come, I am not done yet', he shouts.

In the same way as with Leonardo's painting, the question that faces us is, where are we in relation to this piece of sculpture? Are we, as it were, disinterested bystanders, focussing principally on the quite phenomenally skilful way Leonardo applies paint or on the almost annihilating power of Rocha's statue? Or do we allow ourselves to approach, to enter into the scene and walk alongside? I mentioned at the start that I find these two pieces both arresting and moving. And that becomes more immediate and relevant when I ask myself how involved I want to be. Because it's all very well to be arrested, in the sense that the power of the art stops you dead in your tracks, but the important thing is to move on, nourished, energised, angered, and so on. The worst reaction to their art that Leonardo or Rocha could receive would be a shrug of the shoulder and a drifting on. A moment of 'whatever....'.

Because the journey is only just beginning. We see the rocky landscape behind the cosy family group (no sign of Joseph, you'll have immediately noticed), but it is into exactly this landscape that we will be travelling. And assuming that to wrench Rocha's Christ off the cross is not an option, if we are in any way moved by this sculpture, we really have no alternative but to take that first step of our own journey into the world of darkness and of unfamiliarity, and we have to trust.

For it is as much through this tenderness and maternal care, as this rage and this pain, that we may encounter the realities of the love of God.