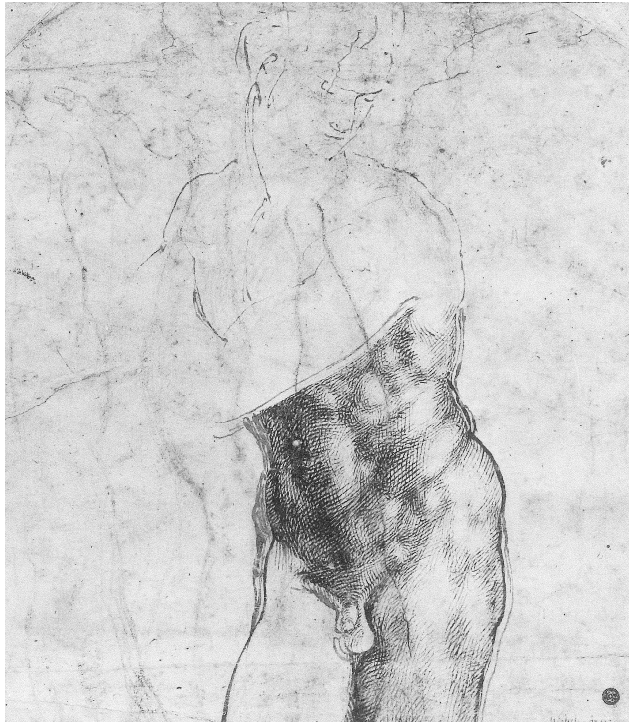




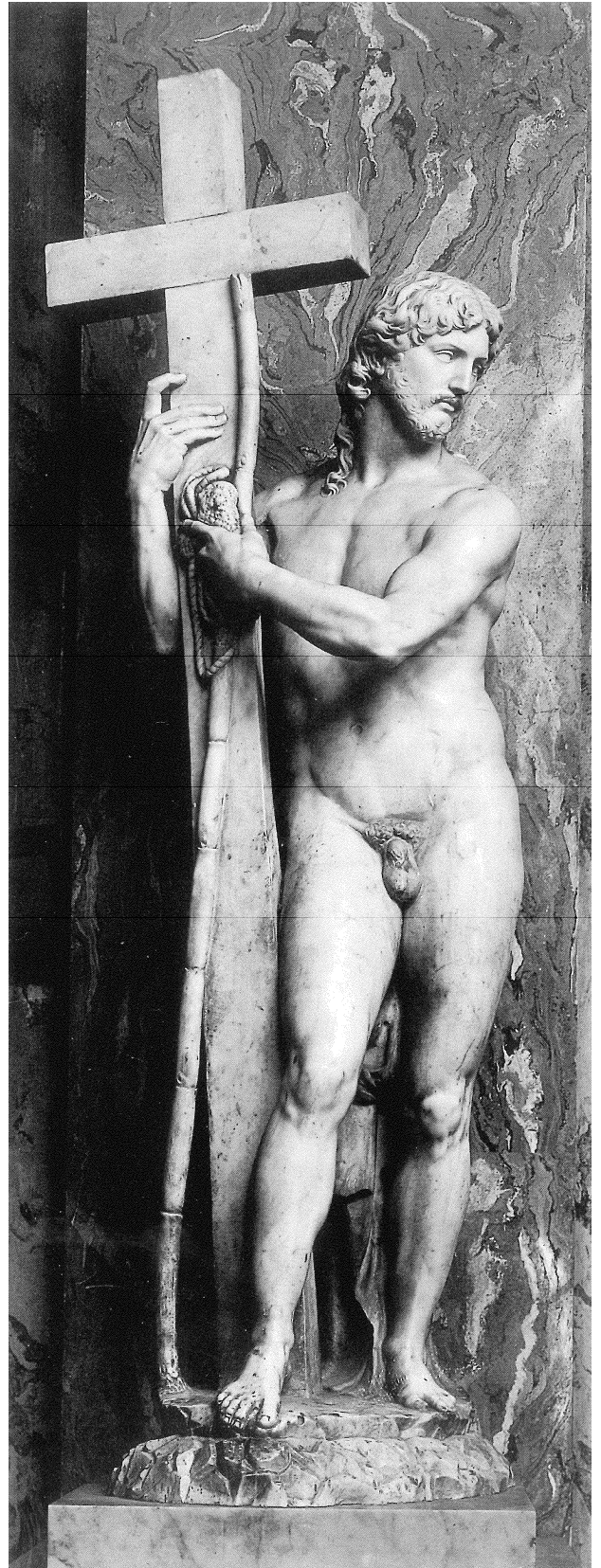
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Images of Christ



Michelangelo (1475–1564): *Risen Christ*

By Dr Frank Salmon



May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

On any given day in Rome, the Basilica of St Peter throngs with visitors, and most jostle to see Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Mary cradling the body of the crucified Jesus. The 'Pietà' is not, however, the only statue of Jesus by Michelangelo that can be found in Rome. His 'Risen Christ' stands in the Basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. This church is situated beside the Pantheon, perhaps the second most visited building in the city after St Peter's. But very few of those who enter the Pantheon visit Santa Maria to look at the Michelangelo statue that it houses. For me, this has always been one of the artist's most fascinating sculptures. Why, I ask myself, has it failed to capture our imaginations to the degree that has the 'Pietà'? What is its character as an image of the Saviour at a cardinal moment of his life on earth? And what spiritual lessons can we take from this statue? These are questions to which I want to suggest some answers this evening.

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It must be confessed straight away that Michelangelo's 'Risen Christ' is a somewhat problematic work of art. It was commissioned in 1514 by three gentlemen, who required only that it should be life-sized, nude, and bearing a cross. Problems with the initial piece of marble chosen mean that the statue we see today in Santa Maria is a second version, carved in Florence from 1519 to 1521 before being sent to Rome - where two of the artist's assistants made finishing touches of varying degrees of competence. Moreover, it was intended that the statue should be placed in a niche. The primary viewpoint would have been oblique and from the right, the full frontal view on our service sheets never possible. Art historical opinion today continues to vary - between those who consider this statue an underestimated autograph work of Michelangelo and those who think it spoiled by the assistants, or even poorly conceptualised in the first place.

But I do not think that the reasons for the relatively little known status of the 'Risen Christ' are primarily to do with its artistic merits - or lack of them. Let us start by being precise about what the statue represents. It is not a Resurrection scene, nor one that depicts one of the famous moments after the Resurrection described in the Gospels: such as that where Christ is mistaken for the gardener by Mary Magdalene; or where he joins two disciples on the Road to Emmaus; or where he invites Thomas to touch his wounds. It does not show Christ Ascending to Heaven - still less at the Last Judgement. No. This is a devotional image rather than a narrative one. Christ is shown - very much still on earth - at some indeterminate point between his Resurrection and his Ascension. Its nearest devotional equivalents, in chronological terms, are paintings or sculptures of Christ alone on the Cross or of Christ as the 'Man of Sorrows' of Isaiah, images in which he displays his wounds and the instruments of his Passion - sometimes with eyes mournfully open, sometimes with eyes closed, as in death.

In the history of Christian art there are far more devotional images of Christ as the Man of Sorrows - and infinitely more Crucifixes of course - than there are Risen Christs of the type represented by Michelangelo's work. Why should it be that Christians throughout the ages have found images of Christ's suffering and death so much more inspirational than images of him in his risen form? After all, it is the gloriously resurrected Christ who stands as one fundamental bookend of the Christian faith, signalling the last stage of God's physical presence on earth, just as the Incarnation signals its inception. The answer lies partly, perhaps, in the nature of human emotional engagement with suffering: we find it so much easier to empathise with a man who is tortured and executed than we do with what must be, for us, the more abstract concept of a man revived from the dead. In the account of the Transfiguration that we heard in our New Testament reading, Jesus "charged [the Disciples] that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of Man was risen from the dead. And they kept that saying with themselves, questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean." This is probably an existential question we have all pondered at some stage in our lives.

But there are reasons other than lack of empathy for our unease with the Risen Christ as a type. They lie partly in the problematic nature of the Gospel narratives and partly in the paradoxical nature of the resurrected body itself. The period between the Resurrection and the Ascension is one of the most perplexing in the life of Jesus. Given its centrality to the entire Christian faith, it is remarkable that Matthew and Mark deal with the appearances of the resurrected Christ in so cursory a way. Luke gives a longer account - but the Ascension apparently takes place on the same day of the Resurrection. In St John's version, however, we are told that Jesus's second appearance to the Disciples came eight days after the Resurrection and many more days must have passed before he joined them at the Sea of Galilee. Apart from those fleeting moments when he appeared to the Disciples, where was Christ all the time? Who was he with? And what was he doing?

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And, from a physical point of view, what was his body actually like? The Gospel accounts are fraught with paradoxes. He is not recognised physically in two of the Gospels - most notably during the walk to Emmaus. And, once he breaks bread and is recognised, he immediately vanishes – disappearing as spookily as he twice appears in locked rooms in St John’s Gospel. Indeed, according to St Luke the Disciples initially believed that the risen Jesus was a spirit and to disprove this he ate in front of them and said: “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have”. The invitation to touch is one taken up by Thomas in St John’s Gospel. Yet earlier in the same account Jesus has denied that same opportunity to Mary Magdalene, the first person to meet him after his Resurrection. “Noli me Tangere” - “do not touch me”, he says, before implying that no one should touch him as he was about to ascend to Heaven.

When he was commissioned to sculpt the ‘Risen Christ’, then, how did Michelangelo choose to respond to these paradoxical dimensions in the biblical accounts and to the natural human tendency for empathy with physical suffering? To my mind it is remarkable to see how totally one of the greatest of all artists cut through these problems. The statue leaves no room for doubt about the corporality and tangibility of Christ’s resurrected body. We marvel at the power of the physique – the shoulders, left arm, torso and thighs. These physiological features are fully revealed to us, of course, because of the patrons’ requirement that the figure should be shown nude. Nakedness is a great rarity in representations of the adult Christ in art. Indeed, it was deemed so shocking here that the statue was given a metal loin cloth in the seventeenth century – an absurd addition that has been periodically removed and replaced throughout the ensuing centuries. Some theologians have sought to explain the nakedness by pointing out that Christ’s grave clothes were abandoned at the moment of resurrection. But this prosaic reasoning misses the point – that the figure had to be nude in order to show Christ’s redemption of the sin of Adam. And, more than this, the pose given to Christ by Michelangelo, with his weight on the left hip and leg, is the so-called “contraposto” common in ancient Greek and Roman statues of gods such as Apollo and Bacchus. So here we see also symbolised the complete triumph of Christianity over pagan religions.

To Michelangelo, however, these theological points were doubtless of less concern than was the opportunity to concentrate his creative forces on depicting the splendours of the human, male form. Had the statue been placed in its niche setting as intended, Christ’s face would have been brought more into play – but the expression is passive, the pupils of the eyes only lightly carved. It is the muscular torso - “so moving a topography” to Michelangelo, as one art historian has put it - that would have struck the viewer most. In evidence of this one can turn to the magnificent pen and ink drawing that documents the genesis of the statue, also reproduced on your service sheets. Indeed, so perfectly did Michelangelo wish to show Christ’s torso that he declined to include the piercing caused by the soldier’s spear, with its Eucharistic flow of blood and water. The nail holes to the hands and feet are there – but they are minimised. The instruments of the passion chosen are the hyssop reed and vinegar sponge for which, according to St John, Jesus had actually asked in order to fulfil the prophecy of Psalm 69, not the more obvious instruments of torture and death. The cross itself, which the clients obliged him to include, is reduced in size to a symbol and prop. Seen obliquely in the niche, it would not even have been obvious that it was a cross.



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Michelangelo has done everything in this work to remove all sense of suffering, disfigurement and death. His 'Risen Christ' is the absolute antithesis of a Crucifix or a Man of Sorrows. Instead of commemorating Christ's body as broken for us in the Eucharist, he shows us Christ in perfect, healthy human form. What spiritual message can we take from this interpretation? Michelangelo was a poet as well as an artist and he ends one his sonnets thus:

“God hath not deigned to show himself to me
more clearly elsewhere than in human form;
and that alone I love, because it images him.”

This is a paraphrase, of course, of the account of the creation of mankind given in Genesis, that we heard in our Old Testament reading: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.” Michelangelo could show God best by showing the Risen Christ as the most perfect man. Moreover, let us recall that Christ not only suffered and died in order that we should have everlasting life after our deaths, but also in order that we might live in the light of his risen life during our time here on earth.

In many ways the biblical text that fits best with this understanding of Christ's resplendent body is not the narrative of the Resurrection but rather that of the Transfiguration, the only occasion in the Gospels on which God speaks directly to mankind – confirming that Jesus is his son and illuminating his figure to emphasise this. Perhaps the whiteness of Michelangelo's marble Christ may be compared to the moment of Transfiguration when, in St Mark's beautiful words, “his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them.” Or perhaps Michelangelo's 'Risen Christ' may be compared with Charles Wesley's great hymn 'Christ whose glory fills the skies' that we sang earlier this evening, where the imagery of dawn works as a metaphor for Christ's Transfiguration and as a revelation to the enlightened way we should live our lives. A gay, Catholic, Italian Renaissance artist and an eighteenth-century English proto-Methodist may seem most unlikely bedfellows. But what the sculpture and the hymn seem to share is a transcendent vision. It is a vision that seeks to transcend both the emotive sin and guilt associated with Christ's death, and the paradoxes inherent in the biblical narrative of the Resurrection that may give us cause for doubt. In their place, we are offered the assurance that, whatever the nature of physical resurrection may turn out to be, God is here with us now, in our living bodies, the homes of our eternal souls.

May we, then, hold before us the image of Michelangelo's 'Risen Christ' as we pray, with Charles Wesley:

“Visit then this soul of mine,
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, Radiance divine,
Scatter all my unbelief.
More and more Thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.”