



7 February 2010  
Sexagesima  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 55 vv. 1–11  
John 20 vv. 10–18

## Images of Christ



**Bramantino (c.1456–c.1530): Risen Christ**

By The Rt Rev'd Christopher Herbert

I was staying with friends in Madrid a few years ago and they took me to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Gallery. It's a gallery which does not overwhelm you with its grandeur, nor with the quantity of its paintings. In fact, it is so arranged that you can walk gently and quietly through the history of Western European art in just a couple of hours. You begin in the galleries at the top of the building, which are devoted to paintings from the Italo-Byzantine schools of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and as you make your way down through the Gallery, you finally emerge into art of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries at street level. It really is a gorgeous place.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from [chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk](mailto:chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk)

© Christopher Herbert



7 February 2010  
Sexagesima  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 55 vv. 1–11  
John 20 vv. 10–18

Well. Bring to your mind some of those Italo-Byzantine paintings. They are highly stylised, static. Where the figures are set in a landscape, that landscape usually consists of stylised rocks in improbable shapes. The background is almost invariably golden, to represent the depth and glory of eternity. They are images which deserve and need a certain kind of attention, a stilling of the soul. They are in the great icon tradition, and act as gateways into prayer...

It was whilst I was gazing at some of these 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian images of saints and the Virgin Mary, that I saw, out of the corner of my eye, at the far end of the gallery, the painting by Bramantino that we are considering this evening.. It was entitled “The Risen Christ”. The contrast between the holy impassivity of the Italo-Byzantine paintings and this image from the late 15<sup>th</sup> /early 16<sup>th</sup> century fascinated me. I stood in front of it for a long while, then moved back to look at the earlier images, and then returned to the Bramantino.

It started a whole series of questions running in my mind, such as: What were the spiritual and theological forces at work, which changed human perceptions of the Christ figure from the impassive, to the suffering human figure that I saw in the Bramantino? Put simply: how and why did the iconic and deeply beautiful images of Christ in earlier centuries give way to this suffering Christ, whose eyes are red-rimmed with anguish? It raised other questions about images of the Resurrection. Why are there so few of them in Western art? Can we trace when they began?

I was only in Madrid for a brief visit, but each day I returned to the Gallery to look again at this image...and I have kept a framed post-card of it ever since, in my study.

What does the painting show? It is Christ raised from the dead, a Christ who has around his shoulders the shroud of burial. It is a Christ whose wounds remain visible beyond and through death; a Christ who has been into and through Hell. His gaunt and haggard face bears tribute to the mental, spiritual and physical suffering he has undergone.

In the background there is a harbour with a boat whose mast is Cross-shaped. To one side, there is a broken entrance to a temple; beneath the right hand of the Christ figure, there is an abyss, and behind him is what appears to be the broken pillars of a large building. The symbolism is that of a Christ who has broken out of the jagged Gates of Hell and now begins to walk towards us. And yet the figure, by revealing the wound in his side, seems to beckon us towards the reality that his suffering, even though he has broken free from Hell, continues to mark him.

It has echoes of the Doubting Thomas story: the Disciples had experienced the Risen Christ, but Thomas had not been present. They kept saying to him, “We have seen the Lord”, but he said, “Unless I see the marks of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will not believe”.

Bramantino’s painting then, explores the relationship between Christ and his followers and, by implication, the relationship between the Christ and the viewers of the painting. It poses questions which seek answers.

But who was the artist? Here is where another set of questions begin. Bramantino was born Bartolomeo Suardi, the son of Alberto Suardi, and he took, or was given, the nickname Bramantino, because he had been trained, (or so it is surmised), by the great Donato Bramante. Donato Bramante had been born near Urbino in the Marche and was an architect and painter who had been commissioned by Pope Julius II to rebuild St Peter’s.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Christopher Herbert



7 February 2010  
Sexagesima  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 55 vv. 1–11  
John 20 vv. 10–18

Bramantino was responsible for a number of paintings now in public collections: there is a Madonna in the MFA, Boston; a Pieta in the parish church of Somma Lombardo; a Holy Family in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan; a Madonna and Child in the Met, New York and, nearer at hand, a Visit of the Magi in the National Gallery, London.

I am no expert on Bramantino, but I want to suggest that if any of you are interested in making your name in art history, you might well find it valuable to do some post-grad or post-Doc research on this painting. The more I look at it, and compare it with other paintings attributed to him, the more I have questions about attribution. Certainly the landscape seems to bear resemblance to his other works, but the central figure is unlike anything else he painted. In all the other paintings I have mentioned, the figures are loosely painted; they are indistinct, like figures modelled from Plasticine, whereas the figure of Christ in this painting is anatomically accurate, fine, taut, and detailed. The contrast really is remarkable...In none of the other paintings is there much engagement with the viewer. It is as though we are witnesses of a static tableau. But in this painting, the figure engages with the viewer intensely. The eyes of Christ look directly and hauntingly out at us...

If it is not by Bramantino, who was the artist? I have no idea...except that I think I should begin looking towards Mantegna, and those who may have learnt from him.

This is not meant to be a sermon about the problems of attribution in Art History, so I won't say anything about the possible influences of Piero della Francesca, or influences from the Ducal Court of Urbino...Whoever the artist was, he has left us with a remarkable and very rare image of the Risen Christ.

Let me return to one of my earlier questions: "Why are there so few images of Resurrection in Western European art?"

There are a number of reasons;

1. Instructions from Pope Innocent III in the twelfth century argued for the centrality of the Cross/Crucifix on altars.
2. The second reason derives from the theology of the Mass. At the Mass the Doctrine of Transubstantiation declares that the Risen Christ is present in the consecrated and elevated Host. Therefore, if Christ is risen, and is present mystically and substantially in the Mass, all other images of his resurrection are superfluous.
3. The third reason relates to the Gospel stories. The accounts of the Resurrection in the Gospels are so perplexing and elusive, they are artistically very demanding. How can you portray the Risen body? Instead, what artists have tended to concentrate on, are images of encounters between the Risen Christ and his followers, such as the poignant meeting with Mary Magdalene in the Garden. Out of that has come some astonishing paintings, such as Titian's "Noli me tangere" in the National Gallery; or, more recently, the same episode painted by Graham Sutherland, in an altarpiece in Chichester cathedral.
4. And the fourth reason is related to the history of liturgy. Certainly, from the tenth century onwards the focus was on the encounter of the Three Marys with the angel at the Tomb, rather than on the curious physicality of the body of the Risen Saviour.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Christopher Herbert



7 February 2010  
Sexagesima  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 55 vv. 1–11  
John 20 vv. 10–18

5. Fifthly, changes in spirituality in the West, from the tenth century onwards, meant that more and more attention was given to the human sufferings of Christ at his Passion and Crucifixion than was given to any post-death appearances.

But, to conclude, I want to return to the theology of this painting by Bramantino.

One of the things which the Gospel of John insists on, through its story of Doubting Thomas, is that the wounds of the Risen Christ were not obliterated by the miracle of the resurrection, but were incorporated within it. That is, I believe, a profound and most moving insight about the very nature of God. It is an insight reflected in other great paintings of the 15<sup>th</sup> century; for example, Rogier van der Weyden's altarpiece of the Deposition, now in the Prado, and his Last Judgement in Beaune, Burgundy, where Christ, seated on a rainbow judging humanity, continues to be marked by the wounds of his crucifixion.

For me, (and I recognise that some here will find this unacceptable), the only God who is morally worthy of worship is one who, having created a world in which suffering and brokenness are inherent features, takes all the suffering to himself to redeem it and to transform it. If God remains aloof and impassive in the face of suffering, then I find it very difficult to ascribe any morality worthy of the name to such a God. But, in Jesus Christ what we are given, and what is revealed to us, is one who really and truly takes all suffering to himself, who is nailed to a cross. He enters the final absurdity and destructiveness of death and, through love, transforms it at the resurrection...

Bramantino's painting gives us a Christ figure who challenges us to ask what the relationship is between suffering, death and God, and who reveals the answer with wounded, self-effacing and inviting humility.