

Contemporary Commentary

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The Descent from the Cross, Dedication Transcript, given at St. Andrew's Church,

Wickford, Essex (1996, June 10.)

Editor's note to readers:

Contemporary Commentary by Alan Thompson, to assist the viewer with their appreciation of the painter's work. The commentary is recorded here in its original format (i.e., without references).

The Descent from the Cross, Dedication Transcript

Today Marks an important occasion. For this fascinating picture has been commissioned by our outgoing priest, Father Raymond and is now hung and dedicated In our Church.

David Folley the artist has depicted the Descent of the Body of Christ from the Cross. And like to Icons of old the picture invites us in to meditate and reflect upon the scene.

As we look, we see the scene:

Many of the actors in the great drama of the crucifixion have played their part and have gone.

No Crowds now, just the reality of death and the empty cross. Jesus's body had been lifted up, as St Johns Gospel has it, but now the tortuous reality of the body being brought down from its exalted place on high.

Some artists have sought to capture the profundity of the moment by making it look so very beautiful. Even pretty.

In the television programme "Stains of War", the photographer George Roger spoke about his visit to Belsen after the war and his professional work, arranging what were considered to be "beautiful compositions" of the dead.

Approached by a prisoner who tried to talk to him but fell dead at his feet from weakness, Roger was positioning himself for a good angle on the corpse when he suddenly thought:

"My God, what's happened to me?"

He never undertook military assignments again.

We want to be told in our news bulletins all about the horrors, but we want the pictures to have a beautifying element to make the acceptable.

We want them to report the brutal truth but not in too brutal way.

So it is that Michelangelo's Pieta, that well-known white marble statue of Mary seated, dressed in her flowing robe with the body of the dead Jesus resting across her lap helps us to see the sadness and the sorrow of her to whom Simeon in the Temple had promised "a sword will pierce your heart."

We sense the awe and wonder of a mother with her dead Son. She is quietly sensitive to the majesty of him who had died to save us.

But in the paining which we dedicate today we come nearer to the horror.

The vivid colour and distortion of the horror of it all.

The Darkness and the light,

The body and the pain.

The deadness and the prurience.

The ghosts of the part and the glow of the dawning day.

The prayer and the anguish.

It is the sort of paining which swirls at you and will of let you be still and contented at what you see.

For you witness the awe-inspiring truth that the God of Love has given his all.

You are invited into the action, to gaze upon the sacrifice; feeling both riveted to the spot and yet moved to respond.

The picture is not there to present us with how the situation actually looked, but to make us look and see what could not outwardly be seen.

It was Picasso who said that: "Art is a lie that tells you the truth about reality" The truth about reality.

An Artist prizes the lid off the box of our perception. We are made to look at the same old thing. But to see it anew – to look for its mystery.

All through Saint John's gospel, Jesus repeatedly tells his disciples of a mystery. He tells them that he will be "lifted up from the earth."

And in this lifting up he will be glorified, and he will glorify the Father who sent him.

In being lifted up from the earth.

No Doubt the disciples expected some great, triumphant elevation of their master. But his words find their fulfilment in a very different way.

Jesus is taken by the authorities, is beaten and tortured and is nailed on to a cross and then he is lifted up from the earth. Lifted up on the cross like a guilty slave; lifted up to the Father as his glorious Son.

The mystery which St John realises is that as Jesus is lifted up to suffering, at that very moment he is lifted up to victory.

The very earliest paintings of that crucifixion scene were of Jesus lifted up on the cross, but not stripped and beaten, but on the contrary, wearing the robes of a King in glory. Arms stretched out on the cross and yet wearing the robes of a conquering victory.

"Art is a lie that tells you the truth about reality."

Jesus never wore the robes of a king when he was on the cross. Yet the eyes of the believing artist can see them there.

Outwardly, when Jesus was taken down from the cross it must have been all sorrow and humiliation.

And yet, I remain convinced in my heart that even then his mother sensed that in that passion – the passion of the For all that humanity has done to the Body of Christ through the year – it still lives.

The Body of Christ, the Church, has been peopled by suspect folk in its time. It has been made to participate in unsavoury acts. It has been abused.

And yet for our sake the Church, the Body of Christ still lives. The Church around the world grows stronger and stronger, that we might belong, and believe.

For this is the point:

God is able to take the suffering of any moment and use it as the material of his Glory.

He takes the mess that we make and he transforms it and makes it into something beautiful.

He has created us and this beautiful universe, but we have got hold of it and we have marred it and forsaken it, and the crucifixion just about sums up where we are up to.

But he makes even of that something beautiful again.

He takes death and makes life.

And we see that re-enacted time and again. The death of nature each winter is the raw material of new birth each spring and summer.

The Death of old prejudices gives way to the openness of a bright new tomorrow.

As one door closes, a new window of opportunity opens wide.

We say our thank yous and our farewells to old and dear friends so that new friendship can be welcomed.

Jesus is always taking the sorrows of the moment and using them as the raw material of tomorrow's glory.

David has painted a picture of the dead body of Christ and yet there is life oozing out the canvas.

We Celebrate an Easter faith.

We, like artists through the ages long, look for the mystery of life always within.

We look to the Passion of Christ and see his compassion victorious We look to his Church in difficulties in every age, and see him using it to bring yet more of his children into the light of faith.

We give glory to him... who is the God of Peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant.

...this prayer we make in the name of Jesus Christ

Who was lifted up from the earth that we might see the power of his love, and his compassion.

AMEN.