

“The Way of the Cross”

This week we begin a new Midweek Meditation series titled *Images of Christ: Art, Scripture and Prayer*. The purpose of this series is to discover a prayerful dialogue between scripture and art. Though I am not an art historian, I have long used art in churches and schools as a way of attempting to understand how the artist read scripture, and where we might also see ourselves in the biblical story. In doing so, we enter into a prayerful dialogue between scripture and the work of an artist. Many pieces of art, that today hang in museums or are held in private collections,



were originally commissioned to be placed in churches and the sacred spaces of monastic communities, providing a visual focus over altars and communal space that drew worshipers’ eyes upward into the presence of God. Such artistic images were not meant to be worshiped, rather, they were meant to provide, through prayer and meditation, a way of deepening one’s faith in God. It is in this spirit that we begin a new series. This series will continue through the week of the festival of Christ the King (November 22).

Week 1: El Greco,
Christ Carrying the Cross (1590-95)

Known as “El Greco,” Doménikos Theotokópoulos (1541-1614) was a Greek artist of the Spanish Renaissance whose work often defies rigid categorization. Though he painted during what is considered the period of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, his paintings have also influenced modern movements such as Cubism and

Expressionism. Though in his will, El Greco called himself a “devout Catholic,” modern scholars have also argued that he very likely had strong Greek Orthodox roots. El Greco grew up in Crete, which was a province of Venice, where he eventually moved to work as an artist. Later, he worked in Rome, and then moved to Toledo, Spain where he worked until his death.

El Greco often used color and locations in symbolic ways. For example, in this painting, the red inner garment of Christ is meant to point to his divine nature, and the blue cloak to his humanity. In other words, in becoming human Christ, the eternal divine Word, assumed the garment of humanity, becoming like us. Likewise, when El Greco portrayed followers of Jesus such as Peter or Mary Magdalene, these cloaks and their colors were reversed, indicating that in

faith, we are clothed in red with Christ's divinity that covers our humanity. So in this painting we see Jesus carrying the cross in his humanity, obedient to God while suffering for the world.

The question might be asked, "Which gospel did El Greco paint this scene from?" Most likely from John 19:17, "*and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.*" The Synoptic Gospels all indicate a different scenario: that Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus (see Mt. 27:32, Mk. 15:21, and Lk. 23:26). Here, however, we see Jesus carrying the cross in his humanity toward the place of his execution, where he would die for the sake of the world.

The stormy background of the painting suggests the coming hour of his suffering, as well as the context of the entire world. For though the biblical setting is outside Jerusalem, there is nothing in the painting to suggest that specific location. Rather, from the moment Christ carries the cross, he carries it in the context of the entire world and for all of humanity – for each of us.

Three additional iconographic aspects might also be mentioned. Jesus' gaze is upward toward heaven, modeling for us the eyes of faith so that even when carrying our own cross, we too look upward toward God for strength. The crown of thorns points to his kingship, a sovereignty that continues to be misunderstood by the world, because this king suffers for others. Finally, though the cross is heavy, Jesus' hands gently and tenderly carry the cross that represents a heavy sacrifice for others overcoming all suffering and death.

The entire painting evokes Philippians 2:7-8, that Christ was in the form of God, "*but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*" El Greco achieved a unity of form and space on the canvas by weaving together the humanity of Christ with the universality of the cross for the entire world. El Greco helps the viewer grasp that obedience to the way of the cross is the basic path of Christian discipleship. This theological perspective was part of the entire Reformation period, both Protestant and Roman Catholic.

The devotional intensity of the painting, like a Byzantine icon, draws the viewer into the image of Christ, so that freed we might contemplate with devotion, the one who exists beyond the painting. A significant devotional question might be, "Where am I in this biblical scene?" The words of Jesus, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*" (Mt. 16:24) are helpful here. In looking at Christ in this painting, we see the one who "*humbled himself and became obedient to...even death on a cross.*"

Jesus continues to invite us to follow him in his work of suffering for the world. To deny oneself is to humble oneself to the greater goals and direction of God for the world. It is an invitation that will require a lifetime to fulfill, and one that cannot be fulfilled without one's own dying to self and to the world. Jesus invites us to take up our cross, and with the words "follow me" assures us that he walks with us.

We are not alone in a time of pandemic, challenge and anxiety. The storms that El Greco painted around Christ in this painting could well represent the storms of our own times. No era is free from storms. Christ continues to bid us follow him, tenderly carrying a cross of suffering for others while focusing our eyes toward the only kingdom that has true power to transform times of illness and injustice into times of resurrection and hope. Amen.

(Image: located in the National Art Museum of Catalonia, Barcelona, Spain)