

Week 5: “Bearing the Cross” (John 19:17)

The way of the cross is incarnational. Jesus carried the cross in his humanity, thereby showing us a way in which we might bear the burdens of others in this world. In the cross God is hidden in suffering, but also revealed in the person of Jesus. Like Philip’s words, “*Lord show us the Father*” (Jn. 14:8), we know that when we see Jesus and the cross we have seen the Father, and know the nature of God’s love. We are called to love and carry the burdens of our neighbor, and in doing so, we reveal Christ with us even in the midst of the chaos of the world.

The first image this week, *The Procession to Calvary* (1564, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, is a large painting with Christ at the center, fallen under the weight of the cross. The scene is set in the Netherlands of the 16th century and filled with hundreds of uniquely rendered people. The crowd moves from left to right, from the walled city of Jerusalem to Calvary in the upper right of the painting. On Calvary, two crosses have already been erected and a worker digs the foundation for a third cross in the center. Clouds gather as the sky begins to darken on Good Friday. Bruegel has painted the gospel story, but the scene is set in his own medieval world, placing the cross squarely in the center of a medieval public execution. The ritualized suffering and death of Jesus, is portrayed like a carnival, as something we watch with a strange fascination or as something we may even be indifferent to.

Bruegel’s painting is massive (49”x67”) and contains more detail than can be unpacked here. The messianic event takes place seemingly unnoticed by the crowds. In the transition from life to death, the two thieves who will be crucified with Jesus ride in a cart ahead of Jesus (Lk. 23:32); they do not carry their own execution crosses, rather, they anachronistically carry small crosses in their hands as priests hear their confessions. The symbolic meaning is striking: we see ourselves transported from life to death, like thieves sentenced for our sins and carrying in our hands the only thing that will lead us to resurrection, faith in the cross of Jesus.

Christ is dressed in the blue of his humanity, utterly overwhelmed by the cross, without a halo or any supernatural light indicating his divinity. In his humanity, he suffers with humanity. Roman soldiers are portrayed as red-coated Spanish soldiers, occupying forces that controlled Flanders during Bruegel’s lifetime. In the lower left, Simon the Cyrene is being forced at spear



point to help carry the cross. In the foreground, Jesus’ mother Mary, St. John, and Mary Magdalene mourn.

Bruegel has set the messianic event of Jesus’ procession to Calvary in the center of the chaos of the everyday, where indifference and even cruelty unfold around it. By placing Christ within the chaos of the everyday, Bruegel’s painting

is a moral tale we are meant to dwell upon today.

The second image by El Greco, titled *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1590-95, National Art Museum of Catalonia, Barcelona), allows us to consider John's words, "*So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha*" (Jn. 19:17). The eyes of Christ are focused outward toward the place of his crucifixion and upward toward the horizon of God's inbreaking kingdom. Jesus' hands carry the cross with reverence and tenderness. There is an implied question here for us: do we carry the cross, bearing the sufferings of others, with reverence and tenderness? This is what Christ does for all people. The background of the painting is absent of locale, yet filled with dark clouds, symbolizing the universal need of a Savior who is present with humanity in every location, nation, ethnicity, gender, and identity, as human beings face life's complexity and storms.

Bruegel and El Greco painted these two images only thirty years apart. The late medieval and Reformation world had been shaken by wars and plague, yet Christ and the cross are shown at the center of the storms and chaos of life. We are encouraged to keep our eyes on Christ at the center of our lives during the times in which we live today.



One of the hardest things about the way of the cross is following and staying close to Jesus. As Bruegel's painting suggests, life continues to be a chaotic spectacle; Christ is always at the center but surrounded by indifference and cruelty. In El Greco's image, Jesus keeps his eyes fixed on the goal of the kingdom, encouraging us to raise our sights beyond the self-centeredness and chaos of the everyday toward a life of carrying the burdens of others as a sign of love.

The windmill at the top of the stone crag at the center of Bruegel's painting might be said to symbolize the church, built on a rock. The cruciform blades of the windmill only become powerful as the winds of challenge and change are directed upon them. The church appears ready to totter and fall, yet is supported by the rock and driven by the power of the cross. The mill grinds wheat into flour that becomes the bread of heaven.

At St. Mark's we gather as one church with Christ and his cross at the center. Even in our own time of pandemic and the chaos of strife, indifference and cruelty, Christ is present at the center of our life together in worship and service. Writing about fifty years prior to these paintings, Martin Luther wrote of God both hidden and revealed in the cross. For Luther, the cross, Jesus, and his followers are "masks of God" (*larvae Dei*) through which God reveals love, justice and mercy in this world. God wears a mask, which is to say that the way of the cross is incarnational, God both hidden and revealed in each of us.

You are a mask of God. God is hidden in you and is revealed through your faithful bearing of the cross for others. Our own age is not free from suffering and indifference. Christ is still at the center, hidden, alive and loving. Allow the winds of change and chaos to empower the cross in you so that you might reverently and tenderly bear the cross for others. In doing so, you reveal the hidden love of God. Amen.