

Victoria Methodist Church, 8 September 2024 - Service

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Introduction

Last week, David spoke about Christian Spirituality and how on the one hand there is the Spirit working within us, pushing us to look beyond our self-interest and grow in love, but then on the other hand there are also the things from outside that draw us, that pull us out of ourselves. Today we are going to try and put that into practice as we prayerfully reflect on two of the panels. And then we will also have a look at how that process of prayerfully reflecting on art can give us clues about how to listen out for God in other situations, too.

We're going to start by looking at panel 12 (The Last Judgment) and I will read a reflection that I have written on it. Then we're going to have a look at panel 4 (Pregnant Pause) together and through some questioning I'm going to get each of you to reflect on the panel yourself, essentially to start creating your own reflection on it. And then finally I will say a little bit more about prayerful reflection and what role it can play in our Christian discipleship.

Threads through Revelation Panel 12 – The Last Judgement

Revelation 19-20

Reflection

Revelation. The Final Battle and the Last Judgment. A story of good vs. evil. But not like all the other good vs. evil stories, because this one carries the claim of being more than just a story, the claim that Revelation might somehow include more than just some generalised truths about good and evil. But does that mean we take it word for word? Like the banishment of the dragon shown here, for example? People keep speculating about these 1000 years, the millennium, of peace when the beast has been locked away and Jesus will rule. Is that now? Is it still to come? Will everything all happen at once? This is a carefully crafted book, after all, full of special numbers and symbols. So what does this particular bit mean?

I can't help feeling that this is all very academic. Does it really matter whether this era is now or still to come? I'm not convinced it adds much to my experience of life and death.

More than anything, this story and art seem to express a combination of human experience and longing. Experience, because we do face daily battles with the inner dragons of self-interest, self-criticism or resentment which take over our thoughts or actions, to the detriment of ourselves and others. Experience, because we're only too aware of the external beasts of injustice, greed and hunger for power which leave a trail of destruction across so many lives in the form of war, poverty and death.

And then the longing. Because, wouldn't we all love to have an angel or a cavalry of knights on white horses on our side, simply to chain these beasts up. For the bullies to be judged and condemned. And to know that our names and the names of those we love are written in the book of life. But in life that isn't how it works. The angels and cavalry don't always see our suffering or seem impotent in the face of it. Bullies too often get away with things and while we walk this earth we'll never know what judgment may come and on what side of it we'll stand.

I think the closest we get to the truth of God in this artwork is in that tiny little image in the top right hand corner of a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. Surely, as Christians, as

followers of Jesus, we always have to come back to the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. That, after all, is where we claim to see truth, where we claim to see God. John spoke about a heavenly banquet. But the artist's choice of the last supper for the banquet reminds us of what is really laden on God's tables: not food, but the self-giving love on display in Jesus. The love which means that when we suffer in the midst of the battle, we can know Jesus, know God, at our side, suffering and struggling as we do. The love which in the resurrection outlasted and overcame death, and is what assures us of the ultimate victory of good over evil. The love which overflows with grace, mercy and goodness - and which, if we have faith in it, will stop us ever worrying about questions of judgment. Can anything really ever add to that?

Threads through Revelation panel 4 – Pregnant Pause

Revelation 8-9

Questions for Reflection

1) First of all, I want you to consider whether this is a piece of art which you are drawn to (you may absolutely love it, or perhaps you are just intrigued by it and want to have a closer look and study it in more detail) or is it an artwork which leaves you completely cold or even puts you off (perhaps you're thinking "I don't see why we've got this art in our church anyway"). Either response is fine.

2) Now, for the second point I would like you to think about yourself and why you might have reacted as you did. What does your reaction say about you? About your preferences, perhaps your prejudices? About the way you perceive the world?

Are you a visual or tactile person? Do you easily feel overwhelmed by too much external stimulus? Do the images or words bring up certain associations or memories that have produced particular emotions within you?

What does your response say about who you are? And when you consider that, do you like what you see? Or do you find it difficult?

3) Thirdly, I would like you to think about any associations that come to mind. So, that could be:

- other biblical passage that you are reminded of that perhaps involve silence, or trumpets or locusts or whatever else we have here
- other art: visual art, poem, stories, a song, a piece of music
- or are you reminded of bits of news and current events, or historical events
- or perhaps experiences and memories from your own life or the lives of people you know

4) Finally, I want you to have a look for and think about the contradictions, the things that confuse you, the ambiguities between the different things you've been thinking about. What questions does this art or this passage raise for you? Does the art make you see something from a different angle than you had before? There are so many things here, you may just want to focus on a single part of the panel. Or you may want to think about the relationship of different parts to one another. Do some resonate more with you than others? Why?

Hopefully this time of reflection has allowed you to engage with the process of being open to what you can see here in the panel, what you have heard in the passage (and from others) – open to those things outside of us, that draw and pull us out of ourselves. But also being open to everything you know and are and all that is part of you. And allowing the Spirit within you to push you into seeing new connections, new questions, new insights into yourself, into God, into your faith.

Address

As some of you know, about 7 or 8 months ago, I started writing reflections on works of art - reflections of the kind that I read out earlier and that we then started thinking about together. The inspiration for this really came from the Articles of Faith exhibition that was here at Vic 18 months ago, and which featured lots of artworks from the Methodist Modern Art Collection.

The process of reflecting on art, has got me thinking about the relationship between beauty and forming an emotional connection with art on the one hand, and the ability of art to enable reflection on and provide insights into our understanding of God on the other.

In the Articles of Faith exhibition there were some paintings which (to use David's expression from last week) enraptured me. One of these was [John Brokenshire's *Untitled*](#) which I simply immediately loved. I used to sit somewhere over there during services and I had a view of it over here in the corner and I loved that. But when I then considered the painting, I not only saw a dove which is a representation of God's Spirit. The way it had been painted, enabled me also to see other new things and new ways of thinking about God's Spirit and God's love.

Another painting that enraptured me was [Ghislain Howard's *Washing of the Feet*](#). It was over there on my right, and I would often try and steal a sideways glance at it. But the interesting thing is, that much as it captivated me with its beauty, I really struggled to see in it anything more than simply a representation of that Biblical passage of Jesus washing the disciples feet. I think I am now starting to see more, but it's taken me a very long time. So, much as I have enjoyed this painting, beauty or emotional connection alone has not necessarily been enough for me to reflect and see something more deeply about God, and faith, and my relationship with God.

In fact sometimes, it has just about seeing the right bit of context or knowing the right bit of background information. So [Ralph Beyer's little drawing, *The Son of Man Cometh*](#), for example, was like that. It's this very simple drawing, most of it is actually text. And it always used to leave me rather cold. I had this sense of – what am I supposed to do with this? But then last February, for the first time I walked into Coventry Cathedral. And there it was! Huge! Hewn into this vast stone tablet, hanging alongside seven other similar tablets. Wow! Suddenly it made sense, suddenly it all came alive, it took me back to Moses' tablets of the ten commandments, I learned that the writing and drawings were based on those of the early Christians in the Roman catacombs and suddenly I saw and felt all sorts of new things and was able to reflect on this drawing a completely new and much deeper way.

But the painting which has been most extraordinary, and from which I have perhaps learned the most is this (relatively small) painting by [Graham Sutherland: *the Deposition*](#). Now, I don't know what you make of it, but I'm afraid I think it is awful. I think it's ugly. I think the colours are horrible and they don't really go together. That body is horrendous to look at. And there isn't even anything about the technique that seems particularly

interesting or noteworthy. It's the kind of painting I'll see and go "Urgh – no thanks!" and then move on. Perhaps that is how some of you feel about the art currently on display here in our church. But I was very struck when our Preachers' Fellowship Group met up during the Articles of Faith exhibition and each of us chose a painting we particularly liked and talked about why we liked it and what we saw in it. I, of course, chose John Brokenshire's painting and many others chose other paintings that I had liked, too. But Christine chose this one. She chose Graham Sutherland's *Deposition*. And she told us how she had come to find it particularly meaningful after a trip she had made to Auschwitz where she had seen photos and drawings of the prisoners there. And indeed, it is on photos like those that Sutherland based this figure of Jesus. I remember feeling left utterly astounded that Christine would willingly choose to spend time with this ugly, unattractive, awful little painting. But generally, I value Christine's insights very much, so I thought perhaps I should give this painting another go and a bit more time and see what happens. Now, I was already aware from a talk that I had heard previously that in the midst of the awfulness and tragedy of this painting you can see signs of hope and renewal: the cross and those odd ropes make the sign of an anchor, or the cross and tomb or coffin make a boat – think of Jesus calming a storm. Perhaps this rather strange, possibly hexagonal shaped, coffin with blue on it can be seen as a font, and Jesus rather than being lowered in, is being lifted out – being filled again with life? So here we have some really key Christian themes about new life in the midst of death.

But more than anything I realised that here I had completely dismissed and ignored this painting, when in it we see precisely that God does not dismiss or ignore anyone. In Jesus in this image we see God suffering as those prisoners in Auschwitz suffered. God is present in all the most awful horrible things that happen in our world – including the ugly stuff that we might want to shut out or ignore or turn away from. By ignoring this painting I had closed myself off from the insights that this painting holds. I still think the painting is ugly. I still don't like it. But it contains something of God in it.

Ignoring a painting and missing an insight is one thing. But who are the people and the situations that I, that we all, are ignoring or turning away from? That we don't bother engaging with? Who we don't want to engage with? Who, quite frankly, put us off or repel us? With whom we struggle to form an emotional connection? And yet, might it not be precisely there that we will meet God?

For our crucified God is the one we meet in the rejected and the excluded, in the hurting and the vulnerable – not just in beauty.

And our resurrected God is the one who surprises us and who we don't find in the places we expect, who out of pain and marginalisation and loneliness brings life. Isn't that what we want to be part of? And enable for others?

Jesus, again and again interacts with those who are on the edge of society: with people who are disabled, with the down and outs, with children, even with people like Zacchaeus who exploit others, the people that everyone else, including the disciples, ignores and dismisses. But when these people call Jesus, he turns and he looks at them, he listens to them and he engages with them – and then he is able to respond and make them whole.

Over the summer I read Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. It is mainly a novel about the Black American experience of the time (not a good one), but like all great novels it also tells us something more generally about the human condition. It's a long and at times strange read, but it does speak very powerfully about that sense of being invisible, about not being seen, not being seen as an individual with a name, with your own hopes and

dreams, your needs and desires, with a history and set of experiences and memories that have shaped you and turned you in the unique individual that you are: valuable, human, and as a Christian I would say not just loveable but loved, worthy of being seen.

The author and academic Katherine Rundell has said “I think attention might be so closely bound up with love as to be almost indistinguishable.” And I think she may be onto something. What Jesus does is to attend to people, to pay them attention, to see them, to listen to them, to see deeply inside them for who they are and what they need – and then he can respond.

Seeing, attending to, listening to art, has for me over recent months become a way to encounter and listen out for God. How can I, how can we all learn to do the same with one another, with other human beings as Jesus did? And not just with the human beings we are drawn to, but the ones who we might otherwise prefer to ignore.

Over the coming weeks we will be surrounded by all of this unusual art, full of strange and bizarre images. We are spending 6 weeks on the book of Revelation which is one of the oddest books of the Bible, and arguably not the most important one. Is any of this really going to have anything helpful to say to us?

My challenge to us all over the next few weeks is going to be to engage with the art and the texts. You may find that you don't agree with much of them. That's fine. I have real issues with that image over there of God sitting on the throne being worshipped. But it gets me thinking: is that because of my biases and prejudices, my socialisation? Or is there something wrong with that image? What other images does the Bible give us? Can this image still offer me something that is helpful in my life of faith?

You don't have to take these images literally. You don't have to see them as some huge intellectual challenge. Try engaging imaginatively. As you might with stories or with poetry.

And so I want you, even, perhaps especially, if you think “this art isn't for me” or “Revelation isn't for me” – to engage with it as we did earlier and to see what you can discern about God, about yourself and about your faith as you do so.

And perhaps, for all of us it can be a way to practice seeing, attending, listening to one another and discovering God as we do so.