



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

What Do You See__ - The Fifth Sunday of Lent- 4_03_2022

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

What we see and what we refuse to see is often something in our control. We choose to see what we want to see. Sometimes we are captive to the context in which we are raised, and so we don't have a frame of reference that can always see all the dynamics at work in something. But usually we have a kind of choice to see what we want to see - a decision, and with that decision, a kind of responsibility.

Over the past few weeks, I've been thinking about that exercise and vision. Particularly when there are so many things that try to capture our attention and keep us looking at the spectacle that may have been created. And I've had to exercise a decision to not see it. I don't want to see any more clips of one entertainer slapping another entertainer at the Oscars. I don't need to see it. I saw it once and once things are seen, it's hard to unsee them. And I admire both of these entertainers. There are no heroes here. It's meaningless. It's a spectacle. It's meant to keep us in control, captive in our gaze so that we would miss other important things.

On the other hand, I feel an obligation to see what's happening in Ukraine. And I not only watch that news carefully, but I watch the faces of the people. I watch the plight of the refugees, and I see in their faces the same expressions that I've seen in other refugee populations. And with that decision to see comes responsibility. In the Christian tradition, sight is not merely physical. It's not merely a faculty that we have from the moment we are born. To see is to experience a kind of invitation to dialogue and transformation because what we see changes us.

In the 11th century, Saint Symeon, the New Theologian wrote a following prayer that I find incredibly powerful. And it's all a kind of meditation on that dialogical nature of sight. It goes like this:

“God heard my cries
And from unimaginable heights he stooped down
And looked upon me.
Once more he had pity on me and allowed me to see

The One who was invisible to all,
As much as humankind can bear
Seeing him I was astounded,
Me who was locked up in my tiny house of bone
All surrounded by darkness...
I saw him in the midst of my tiny house
So quickly had he entered in, complete,
Uniting himself to me inexpressibly
Joining himself to me inexpressibly
Suffusing himself in me unconfusedly,
Just as fire can permeate iron
Or light shine through crystal.
So it was, he made me become like fire itself;
Revealing himself to me as Light."

Symeon is writing in the context of a world that is chaotic. In which the area in which he lived had gone through a dark ages in which the rule of law had collapsed. In which the roads were no longer being repaired, in which people were experiencing isolation and conflict and violence. And yet Symeon sees God and realizes that God sees him. And this is an invitation to transformation, to change.

Whenever we look at a painting or an image that draws us in, there is an invitation to dialogue in transformation. And you can somehow see it as maybe asking three questions when you look at any image that powerfully captures you. And the first question is, what am I seeing? What is going on in this picture? What is capturing my attention? And the second is, how do I see myself because of what I see? Because there's an interesting dynamic when we see something, we're often seeing by it in a way that we see ourselves differently. And finally, what change or grace does this image invite me to see in myself?

These three questions come from an incredible tradition of Christian meditation on both images and texts. It's the way you see faithfully. It's the way that you see and read faithfully. And what you see or read in the visual culture of Christianity creates an opportunity for transformation, a kind of responsibility.

Now all of this is going on in today's reading from the Gospel of John, more than anything else that it could be categorized as, this is a kind of image. Jesus is moving towards His death. He has somehow provoked the authorities in a powerful way. And Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the moment in which Jesus becomes too dangerous to let loose is when He makes a whip of cords and He drives the money changers out of the temple. But in John, in the Gospel of John, it's the moment He raises Lazarus from the dead.

The minute people see the resurrection and connect it to Jesus, He becomes too dangerous. He's going to upset too many apple carts. He's going to challenge

the authorities. He's going to upset the structures in place and He has to go. And instead of fleeing or finding a way out as he had done in the past, Jesus begins to move again to Jerusalem because He sees that it is in Jerusalem that He will die, and that His death will bring life. His death will bring change. His death will bring transformation. His death will be not ended but changed through resurrection.

And so we meet Jesus at an intimate dinner with Lazarus, His friend, whom He loved and Mary and Martha. And Martha, as she often did, put on the dinner. And Mary took a costly jar of nard, which is made from a kind of wood and is incredibly expensive and she opens it up. She pours it on His feet and she wipes it with her hair. And immediately, Mary who sees what's happening is met with ridicule and challenge when Judas does not see what's going on. Judas asks a question that only someone who was refusing to see could ask, he says, what about this money? Shouldn't it be spent on the poor?

And John settles a score in today's gospel and says it was a shallow reason and a rationale, a kind of rationalization that you do when you don't want to see the elephant in the room. When you're in denial, for example, and you just come up with something, Judas says, couldn't that money be spent on the poor? And he says it because he doesn't see what's going on.

What do you see when you see this image of Jesus being anointed, deciding to go to his death? Those two things stick with me when I look at this passage. I think of Jesus reigning, not at the resurrection, but in death. Because in the Gospel of John, the glory of God happens, not when Jesus is risen, but when He is lifted up on the Cross so that He might draw the world to Himself, as the ancient writers write. In that moment where Jesus gives Himself fully and dies, it's at that moment that He reigns over death.

And the second thing I see is the nard, because for reasons that are complicated early on in this pandemic, I was called to a house where someone was dying. I ran into my office at home and I found this bottle of nard that somebody brought me from the Holy Land. And I ran to the house and I went to the upper room, into the quiet there, where this wonderful man was spending his last moments of life on earth.

And I explained to the family that we would anoint him. And I opened the bottle of nard, and just as you read in the scriptures today, the scent filled the room. I anointed his forehead after baptism, and then I anointed his eyes and his ears and his mouth and his hands and his feet as a way of giving thanks to God for the senses that he had been blessed with in his life. And then I invited the family to dip their hands in the nard that I poured into my palm and to anoint him as well.

And it was in that moment that I felt something of the peace that radiates in today's gospel. That piece of seeing Christ reign in death, it was if Christ was present in the room and we knew and trusted in that death, that there would be life. That God's yes was greater than any no that has been said in this world. When God's love was stronger than any hate in this world; when God's forgiveness was stronger than any estrangement in this world, in that moment, I saw a passage from death to life, not life to death, because the nard helped me see. What do you see in this passage? How does this passage help you see something in yourself differently? What change is being invited in you by what you see?

As I was thinking about a piece of art to share with you today, I did not think of the many, many, many beautiful images that are in the Western canon and the Eastern canon for Jesus being anointed by Mary. But I thought of this icon, which is a classic icon from the canon of icons that was done recently by Lyuba Yatskiv, who is a Ukrainian artist. She's 30 years old. And this piece is known as the Man of Sorrows, but she has labeled it King of Glory. And both of them enter into the paradox of the Cross because you see the glory of Christ is not when He is enthroned, but the glory of Christ happens on the Cross. And when Jesus becomes known, according to this classic image, as the "man of sorrows," it doesn't mean that He's a sorrowful man. It means that He understands sorrow so that sorrow can be transformed and not pushed out of our sight.

And so this classic icon of the Man of Sorrows is known by the fact that you have a kind of, what they said in Latin, *ostentatio vulnerum* the kind of display of the wounds. And Christ often has His head to one side and it's as if you are bending over Jesus after He has been crucified and you are about to anoint Him.

So the reason why I like this image is it doesn't exactly replicate what happens in today's gospel, but it conveys the kind of practice that we do when we are anointed or when we truly see Christ as Christ sees us. And this particular image was created in the 11th century at about the same time that Symeon, the New Theologian, wrote that prayer, a time of chaos, a time of conflict, a time of incredible disruption. A time of renegotiation and they constructed it, they wrote it because they wanted to give an image of the Christ who reigns over all of those things. And, yet, who was present in all of those things, because He's come to transform all of those things. So we need not be afraid. We must simply trust the beatific presence and peace of the Savior.

What do you see? What do you see differently because of what you see? What change is God inviting you, or grace, to experience as a result of what you see?

Amen.