

Reflections on the Painting Progression

from Pastor Paul Oman

DRAWN TO THE WORD GOOD FRIDAY - RCL Year B

John 18:1 - 19:42

Here we arrive at the “cross”-roads of the Christian faith — Jesus as the *Savior of the World*, *The Lamb of God* in the Gospel of John, is slain for the sins of the world. All things rise and fall on this Truth. God in human form as Jesus, who dwelt among the people in flesh, now undergoes the will of the Father in heaven. Jesus dies at the hands of God’s created creatures, human beings, as he is subjected to the wrath of the Law and its accusation, so that we have hope. We hear in the New Testament that “the law leads to death.” The law brings Jesus to the cross where Jesus will have the final Word - a word of mercy and forgiveness. Death will still come to us, but it no longer has the power to hold us. We see in Jesus that death is merely a door, a gateway to eternal life.

The painting begins in the Garden of Gethsemane, across the Kidron Valley from the center of power in the Holy Land, the Jerusalem Temple. Though the temple is not in view at Jesus’ arrest, you can imagine that Jesus is now standing opposite from the position of the Temple — opposed to it and all it represents. Judas arrives with the squadron of soldiers and members of the religious police after his betrayal of his Lord. The group appears as one interconnected shape in the darkness with lanterns lit. Jesus steps forth to identify himself, to present himself, so that he may drink the cup prepared for him. With an attempt to defend with the sword, Peter cuts off the ear of one who is a threat, but Jesus rebukes him to put the sword away. With his dismissal of the disciples, Jesus takes hold of what is to come and is bound with hands tied, and is led away.

The Gospel of John is often understood as a trial narrative. All of creation is on trial. The events that unfold at the crucifixion give testament to this. Jesus is questioned by religious and political authorities — first before the High Priest, and then before Pontius Pilate. With questioning, Jesus has his accusers on trial, but they are unaware.

As Jesus is taken into the courts, the disciple Peter sneaks into the courtyard to get a closer look, but is recognized as one of Jesus’

followers. Afraid for his own life, Peter denies knowing Jesus. Peter stands with shoulders shrugged while a young woman points her finger at him in the light of the fire. Upon being questioned and denying a third time, the rooster crows. The scale of the Temple in the background in relationship to the people in the foreground are meant to give a feeling of insignificance, powerlessness and fear in the shadows.

As Jesus moves from being questioned by the High Priest, the scene transforms as Jesus comes before Pilate and the crowds. The crowd grows with each brushstroke, shoulder to shoulder, until you, the viewer, are engulfed in the chaos. You are peering over the angry mob, breathing the dust-filled air. Jesus stands among the columns above the crowd next to Pilate and another figure — Barabbas — a man in prison for inciting an insurrection against the Roman government. This is whom the people want Pilate to release in exchange for Jesus. They shouted for Barabbas while demanding that Jesus be crucified.

The wrath of accusation under the law now exerts a pressure that will not allow escape, as desperately as it tries. Pilate tries to sidestep this dilemma by having Jesus beaten and tortured. That was not enough for the crowds. They didn't want Jesus to slip out of their grasp. The most religious in the audience - the leaders of the Temple - needed the government on their side to carry out the execution they wanted. Their own laws prevented them from doing so. With mounting pressure and concern for his own reputation, Pilate hands Jesus over to the soldiers for execution.

The crowd remains in the painting, but the scene around them transforms. Jesus carries his own cross to the place he will die. Outside of the Temple but in its shadow, you arrive at The Place of the Skull, also known as Golgotha or Calvary. Here is where the Romans carried out their public executions. Jesus is nailed to the cross and lifted up in stark contrast to the earthly Jerusalem Temple as the backdrop of this scene. Jesus prophesied, "Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days." This prophecy is now in motion.

The skies continually darken. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is known as "The Light of God". A shaft of light extends from above into the darkness to illuminate Jesus on the cross, both giving insight to his title as "The Light of the World" while also alluding to the light that enters into the Holy

of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple once each year as the High Priest enters in for the atonement of the sin. Jesus IS the new Temple, but no could see this yet.

Jesus is now on his throne, the cross, with his king's crown, a crown of thorns. He is in his greatest hour of glory, according to John's Gospel. For the world and its desires and dreams, this does not appear as glory, but rather the deepest form of shame, humiliation and weakness.

Darkness will come across the landscape of the painting until you are standing in a murky scene of finality. Beneath the cross stands Jesus' mother Mary, Mary the mother of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and the disciple whom Jesus loved. A jar of wine vinegar will appear from which Jesus is presented a sponge for a drink. Jesus then declares from the cross, "*It is finished.*" He bows his head and gives up his spirit. Jesus is dead.

The Sabbath was fast approaching and the leaders did not want bodies on the crosses during this holy day, so the soldiers came to break the legs of those crucified to speed up the process of suffocation. Jesus, however, was already dead. To ensure he was dead, a soldier extends his sword into the side of Jesus and punctures his lung. Blood and water pours out which indicates that he was no longer alive. Therefore, another prophesy was being fulfilled as the soldiers did not break any bones in Jesus' body.

Joseph of Arimathea arrives to claim Jesus' body, of which he had permission from Pilate. Joseph will take Jesus' body, with the help of Nicodemus, to a newly hewn tomb. From the perspective of being inside of Jesus' tomb, you witness the stone being rolled in front of the entrance.

Death has spoken. Complete darkness reigns.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Paul Owen".