

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
GOOD FRIDAY
FRIDAY 29 MARCH 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
John 18:15 - 19: 42

Rogier van der Weyden, "The deposition", 1435,
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Weyden_Deposition.jpg

The painting at the front of the order of service and on screen is a painting by Dutch master Rogier van der Weyden, who lived and worked in 15th century Brussels. It is on display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain.

It depicts Jesus' descent from the cross. It is deeply emotional, subtle and shows manifold variations of sadness and grieving. The size of the painting is huge, the figures life size, portrayed on a box-like small stage, as if in a passion play. The close together figures seem to be pushed out towards us, while we are being pulled in towards them.

With the variety of facial expressions, the detail of tears, red noses, red eyes and red cheeks contrast with the rich detail of cloaks and clothes, the painting presents a montage of emotions presenting all possible reactions to mourning the death of Christ in a confronting and engaging way.

Christ's body is held by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the only figures who are described in the gospels as being present when Jesus was taken off the cross. All the others are extras, a result of medieval imagination and elaboration of the story.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, takes centre stage beside her son, her pose echoing the pose of Jesus. She has fainted, suggesting that she has come close to death herself as Jesus dies. Imitating Christ, but also prefiguring the expectation of resurrection.

In medieval time one of the metaphors used for Christ on the Cross was that of a bow and arrow, posed to pierce death in its release. Even in descent that arched pose is still visible, but now, the arrow has been released and the body is portrayed as starting to relax in death.

At the front a skull reminds us of death, of "memento mori", but also refers to the old Adam, the new Adam Jesus, has come to replace and redeem. Also in medieval times there was a myth that the cross stood on the site of Adam's grave, with the cross as the tree of life growing like a new shoot from his grave.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are both easily recognisable as wealthy, powerful figures in sumptuous clothes. They hold Jesus as he moves down, towards his mother's lap, his bleeding hand close to, but in sharp contrast with, the pale perfection of hers.

Mary Magdalene, with a container of oil close at hand, seems to be buckling under the stress. Bending at the knees she could be ready to collapse, or she may be moving towards supporting Jesus feet. Or is her pose one of a woman in labour, another metaphor for death and resurrection? Her pose is as ambiguous as the story we heard about her two weeks ago. She is wringing her hands in anguish, with her whole body exuding a deep sense of grieving.

On the other side we see Mary Cleopas. The tears on her face so exquisitely painted that one can nearly taste the saltiness quivering at the corner of her mouth.

Next to her John the evangelist is reaching towards Mary, but looking past her, stunned by grief.

The man at the top of the cross is intriguing. His facial expression not so much one of grief, but of puzzlement. He has two nails in one hand, pointing us back to the gruesomeness of what human hands have done and at the same time supports Jesus' arm with the other. A bit of Jewish prayer shawl shows at his side, and it may be that he represents those for whom the cross was, to speak with Paul, a stumbling block or foolishness. Depicting that there is not only grief at the cross, but there is also puzzlement, questioning, guilt and unbelief.

An intensely emotional painting, the scene invites us to become part of what it depicts. To identify with the characters, feel their grief, their sadness, their confusion, their guilt, and their questioning at the death of this innocent man.

In them we may see ourselves, grieving, sad, confused, guilt-ridden, questioning human beings facing the suffering of Christ, and in him our own suffering, and the suffering of the world. Amen.