

Matt Henry
John 19:16-37
30 March 2018

“View from the Cross”

Grace and peace...



I guarantee you almost every other church for Good Friday has a picture of the cross on their bulletin. And rightly so, for preaching Christ crucified is no more central than on Good Friday. This is what faithfulness and forgiveness looks like. So it's a time to just get out of the way and survey the wondrous cross. But that's just it. Most of the time the cross is usually viewed from our perspective. As much as we are able, part of our task here tonight is to try to imagine what it must have been like *for Jesus* to endure the cross and scorn its shame.

This image on our bulletin cover is the view, not of the cross, but *from* the cross. It's an artist's depiction of what Jesus was looking at when He hung there in agony. The artist is James Tissot. He was French painter (1836-1902) and his series called "The Life of Christ" is composed 350 watercolors. This (amazingly detailed 9" x 10") is the most famous watercolor from that series and we can see why when we take in the detail and emotion.

It is a daring portrait! One art critic observed, *"Ultimately, the image is an exercise in empathy. Its point is to give viewers, accustomed to looking at the event from the outside, a rare opportunity to imagine themselves in Christ's place and consider his final thoughts and feelings as he gazed on the enemies and friends who were witnessing, or participating in, his death."*

So who's who in this view from the cross? On the left hand side, you'll see the Roman centurion standing. To his right and left are other Roman soldiers who have lances. Behind them, I believe are at least some of the disciples. They had all left Jesus and fled from the Garden on Thursday (Mark 14:50), but maybe they some of them were brave enough to look on from afar. The townspeople are on the hills looking at the public spectacle. Tissot also put the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in view as if death were staring Jesus right in the face. On the right side, we see the chief priests mounted on their colts. They are decked in religious garb and if you look closely at the original image, these men all have a look of satisfaction as they gaze upon Jesus. They have finally done it. They have finally gotten rid of this impostor who caused so much upset and threatened their power. Yet there is one priest who is not looking at Jesus; he is looking up into the sky and perhaps wondering why the sky is so unusually dark and ominous. In the lower right, there is a container of sour vinegar and the sticks to offer it up on a sponge. At the bottom center, is Mary Magdalene, who was a faithful disciple. In the center behind her are a group of three women—one of whom is Mary the mother of Jesus. Her face connects with Jesus the most directly but sorrowfully as her own soul has been pierced also.

For such an amazing piece of art as this is, I can just hear the pietistic critics lambasting Tissot, “You forgot to show Jesus! How could you depict Good Friday and not show the Savior?” But Tissot did show Him. Did you see where Jesus is? At the bottom center, his nailed feet are visible, protruding out from the cross and framing the face of Mary Magdalene. The placement is intentional because at the rabbi’s feet is the proper place for a disciple. And Tissot was showing what faithfulness looks like as her hands are folded in devotion.

Finally in the lower left, a man is standing by himself, close to Jesus. This is John the beloved disciple. Of the Twelve disciples, John had the best view of the cross. John is the perfect disciple for us to hear from tonight because he was there. He watched the Roman soldiers drive in the nails. He is the disciple given the privilege and responsibility of taking Jesus’ mother as his own. He saw the lifting up of the sour wine in response to Jesus’ words, “I thirst.” He saw the dropping down of his head after Jesus uttered, “It is finished” and gave up his spirit. John witnessed the crucifixion and the aftermath in every gory detail. The looking on Jesus is not just an artistic move...it is prophetic. John 19:37 (quoting Zechariah 12:10), says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.” The people saw it all. They bore witness just as John bore witness for us.

The authority to bear witness is a big deal for John. This is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John, 1,2,3 John and Revelation. He becomes the pastor of the church in Ephesus before he's banished to live in exile by the Roman Emperor Domitian. John's contribution to the church then and now is huge and yet, he was a Son of Thunder! All that we said about James last Sunday could be said about John did too because they acted in concert. Yet for all his contributions in writing, there is only one time when John's words (and not his brother's) also are captured and written down. Mark and Luke recorded this moment that came after the Transfiguration. John reported to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." In other words, John thought it was entirely appropriate to contain or control the power of God. He is concerned about the unauthorized use of power that comes in Jesus' name. But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:38-39). Now John is a dualistic thinker—very black and white. There's life and death, good and bad, light and dark. I think Jesus answers him here with a dualistic answer—and it wasn't what he was expecting. "Whoever is not against us is for us." John hadn't even considered that possibility. Without removing that

dualism, Jesus broadened it into an even more powerful and helpful worldview.

This was bigger than John realized.

Here's proof. As a leader of the early church, word came to Jerusalem that the Samaritans were believers and had received the word of God. So John and Peter both go to check it out. They pray for the Holy Spirit and they lay their hands on the Samaritans. That's wild on its own right. But do you remember the story from last week, how the Samaritans rejected Jesus so how James and John ask if they could call down fire on the Samaritans? They don't get fire. Instead of fire, they get the Holy Spirit through the laying on of John's hands! Now John looked at people the way Jesus did.

You see how far the Son of Thunder had come? Instead of the Gospel being proprietary information, John is making it available to anyone who is willing to receive it! Like Tissot, John has depicted for us the Christ that we may look to Him, know Him and love Him.

John was a witness to love and truth to the end. There on the island of Patmos and in exile, John was the last of the disciples to die. (His brother James, was the first.) John died, by most accounts, around AD 98, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. From the book by MacArthur (Twelve Ordinary Men), "Jerome says in his commentary on Galatians that the aged apostle was so frail in his final

days at Ephesus that he had to be carried into the church. One phrase was constantly on his lips: ‘Little children, love one another.’ Asked why he always said this, he replied, ‘It is the Lord’s command, and if this alone can be done, it is enough.’”

Love is always the right thing to show. Truth is always the right thing to know. Put those things together and you’ve got yourself a witness. God gave John a long life and in that time, John embodies a spiritual maturity that we are destined for as well. John aged well. I want you to age well—not just get older, but grow into the fullness and the maturity of Christ. But it all starts with the cross where a perfect love is on display. Do we dare go there? We have to because that is where our Lord has gone.

Across the dimensions of space and time, I believe there on the cross, Jesus saw you and me, just as He chose us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). He has looked upon us in grace! And through the Scriptures and the eyes of faith, we are able to look to Jesus and have life just as if we saw it with very eyes like John did. “One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe” (John

19:34-35). **This cross is not only about what was done to Jesus. It's about what was done to him for us.**

In Jesus' name, Amen.