

Holy Week Reflection - 8 April 2020

Christ Before Pilate

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Background

Hanging in the North Aisle of St Mary's Church is a large old oil painting. Until a new light over it was recently fitted by Peter Trewby, it was difficult to make out the subject. But now it can be appreciated for what it is: an important work of art in its own right. It depicts a crucial scene in the events commemorated by Holy Week, the trial of the alleged criminal Jesus Christ before the judge, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judaea. It was a subject painted by many major artists for altarpieces commissioned for great churches in Italy, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries,

The Artist

The label on the beautiful frame attributes the painting to Jacopo Chimenti, a Florentine painter better-known as Jacopo da Empoli (1551-1640), which translates as Jacob, or possibly James, from Empoli, a small Italian town between Florence and Pisa. However, it is no longer thought to be his work, although the jury is as yet out on who the artist might be. What experts agree is that it is in the style of a group of painters who were influenced by the outstanding Italian painter Caravaggio, such as Bartolommeo Manfredi.

Who gave it to St Mary's?

That at least seems to be a question with a clear answer! It was given in 1920 by Canon Neville Egerton Leigh, Rector of Richmond 1907-1927. He was related to the Dukes of Bridgewater, who had a famous collection of Old Master pictures. As there are no marks on the back of the canvas referring to an auction house, it seems likely that Canon Egerton Leigh inherited the

picture. As a bachelor, perhaps he thought that it should remain here for Richmond worshippers and visitors to enjoy, and contemplate.

The Subject

Christ has been brought by Caiaphas, the Jewish High Priest, before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judaea, to seek his judgement and thereby punishment on Christ. As Pilate famously 'washed his hands' of the case to protest his own innocence, and the painter has included equipment for such washing of hands, there can be no doubt of the subject. Though this doesn't mean that there aren't aspects and details in the painting which will not be found in the Gospels, but derived much more from ideas then current, and artistic conventions, and even from the painter's own assumptions.

The Figures

The painting shows seven male characters. Christ, who is clearly the most important figure, is of course placed centrally, and he faces us, with two figures to his right - our left, and four to his left - our right. Christ's body is naked under the blood-red 'mantle' (St Matthew's word) partially wrapped around him. Though his hands are bound, he still wears a crown (if of thorns) and carries a sceptre (if a reed). The painter is affirming that, as we know, this truly is Christ the King, if unrecognised by those others in the scene, blinded by their ignorance and sins.

The next most prominent figure is to his immediate right, our second left. This is the Jewish High Priest, Caiaphas, an imposing figure, with an almost apologetic expression on his face. One of the dominant features of the painting is the richly-ornamented, turban-like, head-dress he wears, which is of blue velvet on top, and there is a gold-mounted sapphire brooch with pearl-drop on the turban's rim. Caiaphas wears a blue velvet cloak with fur trim, over a mauve tunic. The forefinger of his right hand points towards us!

All these colour details show how remarkable this painting is. Christ, we have noted, is in red, and Caiaphas is basically in blue, both primary colours. Around

these two, the painting pivots, between two authorities: that of the masterly Jewish High Priest, and the divine Christian power of the Messiah. And Pilate? He is dressed in green, a secondary colour, and so essentially a lesser figure. This vivid colour sense controls the whole picture, which is founded on red, blue and green.

Behind Caiaphas on our extreme left is a guard, wearing armour, with a steel morion on his head. His right hand bears a wooden staff which is largely outside the picture. Of course such armour and associated weapons were unknown in First Century Jerusalem. But the painter's accuracy is of a different sort. For him, any soldier as such is a man of irresistible power and cruel authority. That, after all, is the theme of this painting.

On the extreme right of the picture, sideways on to us and partly out of sight 'behind the frame', as might be expected of a character in a secondary colour, for all his apparent flashiness, is Pilate. His green cloak is fringed with gold braid, and his right hand is raised to his face, which bears an inscrutable expression. That right hand hold a looking glass, so that he can visibly see what is before him. On his head is a red head-dress, trimmed with ermine, of the sort of 'Cap of Maintenance' worn by those who believed themselves to be Renaissance dignitaries, and was, incidentally, formerly part of the regalia worn by the Lord Mayor of York.

Pilate's left hand rests on the left shoulder of his kneeling page. The boy is wearing an expensive deep mauve velvet doublet with slashed sleeves. He holds the silver vessels with which Pilate will wash his hands - the page's left hand holds a ewer, and tucked under his right arm is a bowl, the latter particularly richly ornamented. This boy is the painter's most original creation: uniquely he wears clothes of about 1620, in colours not used elsewhere, and with his well-cut hair, fine eyebrows, his face almost looks as though he wears make-up.

The page is sitting exactly where donors (ie those who have commissioned and paid for the work of art) sit in Renaissance paintings. Like them he is kneeling both inside and outside of the picture. Inside, he is guilty of the dreadful actions leading to Christ's death, since he holds the water for Pilate. Outside,

he belongs to the real world and us, having to experience what we are seeing and being forced to learn from it.

The sixth figure is another guard, wearing plate armour but no helmet, who occupies the space between Christ and Pilate. His face, like all such figures in similar paintings, has a grimacing and menacing expression, and his right hand grips Christ's shoulder. His left hand carries a halberd, which forms a major part of the composition, a threatening element given the cruciform shape of its cruel metal head.

Behind this guard's left shoulder is the seventh figure in the composition, a bearded face below a red head-dress, with no other details visible. Scholars may debate his identity, but the painter knew full well that this is Barabbas, the criminal Pilate agrees to release when he sends Christ to his Crucifixion. Ironically, he also bears that red colour.

The painter knew exactly what he was doing in this picture, insisting that those who see it must look carefully at everything he includes. Even the hands that seem to protrude everywhere. There are ten of them, all unpaired save for those of Christ, which are of course bound together, as in love. The rest, belonging to those who Christ came to save, are gripping, clutching, threatening. Those characters cannot, of course, see the point. And what about those who look at the picture?

Note

Richmond and District Civic Society's *Richmond Review* for 2016 has an interesting article by Richard Almond on this oil painting.