



"We exist for the sake of each other" by Jacob Lawrence

"For the body is not one member, but many." I Cor.12.14

In this painting, we see a seated adult with four children of varying ages and cultural backgrounds in front of him. In his huge hands the adult tenderly holds a small tree with tendril roots. The man and the children are all looking at the tree intently and so we do too. We become conscious of the fragility of the tree and yet of its potential – a few shoots and leaves already in evidence.

If the tree is not tended, the painting seems to suggest, if we do not work together for its well-being, then something vital will be fractured. Indeed, the spiky twigs of the young plant create ominous cracks and fissures across the top of the painting.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

The inter-connectedness of all life was what the painter, Jacob Lawrence, wanted to show us and, to be absolutely clear, he quoted from Marcus Aurelius (121-180AD) to title his work: "We exist for the sake of each other".

Someone eats an animal in a far-away market and the world shuts down, assailed by a virulent disease. Covid 19 has highlighted our connectedness to each other as never before. The virus takes no notice of borders. Nor does human need. Wonderful instances of connected working in the face of the pandemic are in evidence wherever we look. We belong to one another, members of the same body, whoever and wherever we are.

For the Christian, a painting with a tree at its centre cannot but carry resonances of The Tree. Other things here also speak of crucifixion – the enormous hands, the spiky twigs, the rocky hill, the patient vulnerability of the man and the tomblike structure on which he sits... They point to the supreme example of interconnectedness which Jesus reveals on the cross...

Do you see any symbols of resurrection in the painting?

"To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

Karl Barth

Prayer

**O God, our loving creator,
renew in us a sense of
connectedness with each other
sharpen our sense of responsibility
to those both far and near,
and teach us to care more tenderly
for our shared global home. Amen**



The Widow's Mite by Zeferino da Costa

“To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

Karl Barth

Prayer

O God, you are both giver and gift:
as we follow your Son to the Cross
in these days of crisis,
teach us the lesson of your self-emptying. Amen
Amen

“Out of her poverty, she has put in everything she had” Mark 38.44b

Jesus and his disciples are in the Temple in Jerusalem near the Treasury where offerings were made. In this painting by Zeferino da Costa, it is a scribe who is centre-stage. His fine robes cover his portly frame, an extravagant red sash nestling above the bulge of his well-fed stomach. There is nothing warm about him. With his powerful back to a near-naked child and his slender mother in the black of mourning, he directs the well-dressed man in front of him with a flourish. This is what Jesus observes and comments on, Jesus the haloed figure at the top of the steps, his pointing finger drawing the crowds' attention to the posturing scribe and the wealthy donor in sharp contrast to the quiet generosity of the widow who, unseen, gives everything she has.

In a few days time, Jesus' public ministry will be over. He will, in fact, be dead, having, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “uncurled his fingers from around his own offering to give up the two copper coins of his life”.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

Both Jesus and the widow understood what it is to give oneself away. Dying to self and living for others came naturally to them. The world is acutely conscious just now of the countless others who are cast in the same mold. That's why we are all standing on our doorsteps on Thursdays at 8pm to clap and clap and clap. Selflessness is uplifting and deeply moving. Our very lives depend upon it.

What 'two copper coins' of our own lives might we be moved to hand over in this crisis? Time? Energy? Loving-kindness?



Judas' Wife by Chris Gollon

"Then Judas went and hanged himself." Mt 27.5b

The painter Chris Gollon has captured a suspended moment of anguished despair. Though it feels almost intrusive to look, we see a woman whose face is distended with weeping, her nose and mouth reddened and puffy. Something lies under her right hand but she seems to be pushing it away as if it's unbearable. Her eyes are swollen with tears and have ceased to see anything around her. She is somehow isolated, frozen in this horror – whatever it is.

What is it? Who is she? This is Judas' wife with her husband's suicide note under her hand... Did Judas write a note to his wife? We'll never know. Did he even have a wife? We'll never know that either. But one thing Gollon's painting teaches us is that Judas' death had consequences, as all deaths do...

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

It's impossible not to be catapulted by Mrs Iscariot's devastating pain into the terrible losses of our own time. So many disappointments. So much separation from loved ones. So much mental distress. So much grief. So much anguish at the thought of those who are dying alone.

How are we to respond to our own losses and to those of others? Does the poem (right) by Ann Lewin help? Does it offer you any hope?

Bereavement

Dark place
where, vulnerable, alone,
we lick the wounds of loss.

Wise friends say little,
but hold us in their love,
and listen.

There are no guarantees,
only reports from those
who've been there,
that there is hope,
and life persists.

**"To clasp the hands in prayer is the
beginning of an uprising against
the disorder of the world."**

Karl Barth

Prayer

**Grieving God,
you weep with your world and long
for its solace:
as we walk with you to the Cross
deepen our understanding of its
power to save. Amen**

MAUNDY THURSDAY



Washing of the Feet by Sieger Köder

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Jn 13.8b

Before reading further, take a moment with this painting by Sieger Köder. What you can see? How do the two figures relate to each other?

On a low stool (right) sits Peter, dressed in brown. His feet are in a bowl of murky water and his left hand is raised as he exclaims, “Stop! You washing my feet?” His other hand, firm on Jesus’ shoulder, says something very different: “Well then, if you must wash me, wash all of me!”

Jesus kneels before him, his prayer shawl over his head so that his face is hidden. Or is it? Shimmering in the grimy water below we see two eyes, the outline of a head.... We look into Jesus’ face not eyeball to eyeball but reflected in the mess and muddle of our human lives.

What do we see as we gaze at this painting in the context of coronavirus?

Perhaps we’re momentarily taken aback by the washing of feet when, in the last few months, all the emphasis has been on handwashing. Perhaps we feel a stab of sadness that there’ll be no symbolic foot-washing in our churches this year... But there is nothing to stop us from taking time today to wash our own feet symbolically, while imagining that Jesus is on his knees before us, showing us the exquisite tenderness we see in this painting.

It will take some doing. It will require us to hand ourselves over, becoming vulnerable to Jesus’ holy ministrations. Outer layers of self-sufficiency will need to be stripped off.

But what a relief to be able to lay bare our deepest fears and insecurities and to find in the tired and muddy waters of our lives - so badly agitated by Covid 19 - nothing less than the face of Jesus.

“To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

Karl Barth

Prayer

**Tender God,
give us the grace to let you wash us
and to find your face
in the turbulent waters of our lives.
Amen**



The Crucified Christ
ca. 1150-1200

“Twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head” Mt 27.29

The word coronavirus is very new to most of us but now trips off the tongue because we are all hearing and using it so much. Through sophisticated microscopes, scientists can see that the tiny particles of the virus are spherical and that the surface of each sphere is studded with club-shaped spikes. Images of coronavirus particles now act as a backdrop to countless news bulletins and documentaries. The image is chillingly recognizable and familiar.

It's because of the raised prongs circling its round surfaces that scientists have named this particular virus 'Corona', for corona is the Latin word for crown and, at a time when a very different crown is at the forefront of our minds, it's not difficult to want to see a connection between the two.

In the context of coronavirus, what do we see as we gaze at the crowned, crucified Christ (left)?

A contemporary 'corona' has been superimposed upon a 12th century crucifix from Spain. Not thorns but all the fear and distress and death epitomised by the particle are crowning the dying figure beneath. We especially need to see this crown there in these testing times. Though of course it is already there...

The God who becomes flesh in Jesus inhabits the human condition through and through and shows us that God is not apart and remote but suffering with us in total solidarity, even unto death.

As Michael Sadgrove writes: "He was there. He is there. He will always be there with us and for us, this crucified God who bears the pain of the world on his heart. He is the Christ of Coronavirus. It's what incarnation means."

“To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

Karl Barth

Prayer

**Crucified God,
you suffer with and for your people:
in these lonely times of deep distress
sharpen our sense of your
accompanying presence. Amen**