

The Crucifixion

John 19:17-42

Craigie Aitchison was a 20th Scottish painter. He was best known for his many paintings of the Crucifixion. His simple style with bright, childlike colours defied description, and was compared to the Scottish Colourists, primitivists or naive artists, although the art critic Brian Sewell dismissed him as "a painter of too considered trifles".

His career-long fascination with the crucifixion was triggered by a visit to see Salvador Dalí's *Christ of St John of the Cross* in 1951 after the Kelvingrove Gallery acquired it.

The wonderful Sister Wendy Beckett, who died earlier this year, an art critic in her own right, said of tonight's artwork, the Crucifixion 2008:

"In art, there are few crucifixions that stress the inner truth of Jesus' death: that Christ accepted... that He had accomplished all that His Father willed. Shortly before his death, Craigie Aitchison painted this extraordinary crucifixion. The world has been reduced to absolutes, in which only nature is innocent. The earth has become desert, and yet Jesus draws new life, the scarlet poppy (that is barely visible in the brown earth at the foot of the painting). The very presence of the cross has created a strip of living green against which we can make out Aitchison's beloved Bedlington dog (Wayney). But above the land soars Christ on the cross, a luminous body blazing with the fire of love. His features are consumed in the intensity of His passionate sacrifice. Over His head hovers the skeletal outline of the Holy Spirit. There are stars in the sky catching fire from the fire of Jesus, and we see the great curve of the rainbow, a sign of God's covenant with humankind. Aitchison is showing us not what the crucifixion looked like, but what it truly meant."

It has always been a wonderful painting for me, stark, yet vibrant. Vulnerable, yet powerful. In Christian tradition this day, and tomorrow, Holy Saturday, are days that are blotted out. After the agony of the cross, the bitter tears of grief and guilt corrode the contours of the day, bleach out its colour, till we are left with dark nothingness.

There is nothing wrong with this visual interpretation of the drained Good Friday, but this image by Craigie Aitchison tells us that there is another story, and it is one to which we should attend. In the midst of the death and the darkness, in the midst of the emptiness and the void, God plants life, and hope, and resurrection.

On Monday night as we gathered to worship at the first of our Holy Week services, Notre Dame burned in Paris. The image of flame and smoke illuminating and obscuring the great Cathedral of cathedrals was heart-rending. As the central steeple collapsed, and the flames shot high in the air in a fiery devastation, some of the people of Paris who gathered round the burning cathedral sang their lament:

Hail Mary, full of grace.
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.

Like that first Good Friday, bereft people, maybe not even knowing what or why they mourned, separated and gathered, publicly and privately, to lament their loss. Believers and non-believers alike. The centrality of Notre Dame to the people of Paris, and the people of France, so long taken for granted, so often ignored because it was simply 'always there', suddenly became real. This central place, from which all distance in France is measured, was suddenly in danger of being gone. This repository of faith and national memory, "The heartbeat of our story", the English Cardinal Vincent Nichols, said, was in danger of stopping forever.

But it didn't. It stood. Charred, damaged, broken, but not destroyed. The day after the catastrophic fire, one of the first photographs of the interior of the cathedral, taken from the

western door, showed the devastation in the nave of the building. Smoke damaged, twisted and charred wood, but at the eastern end, behind the altar, a golden cross on the wall still gleamed. The cathedral will rise from the ashes of death and God will be worshipped again on that ancient site.

In 1666 in London the Great Fire destroyed much of the medieval city, including St Paul's Cathedral. Sir Christopher Wren began laying out the shape of his proposed dome, he called a workman to bring him a bit of stone. The workman grabbed the first piece that came to hand. Inscribed on it in Latin was the word, *Resurgam*. It means, 'I shall rise again.' From what was dead, life will come.

At the heart of the Craige Aitchison crucifixion is the incandescent, enflamed body of Christ. Charged with the glory of God.

I feel sorry for the people who come to Church on Palm Sunday, and then skip straight to Easter. They miss so much from the stories of Holy Week. Yes there is pain and suffering, betrayal and abandonment, injustice and a cruel death. Yes there is fear and bitterness and dereliction. But beyond all that, as Aitchison's Crucifixion reminds us, is God's burning heart of love for all Creation, and humanity within it.

In the desert earth, the red poppy of remembrance grows. At the foot of the cross, the promise of new life even on the day of deepest gloom already begins to green the earth. As the Spirit of God ascends from the flamed cross and the searing body of the dying Christ, so in the death-darkened sky the rainbow gashes it's promises of God's unshakeable promise of mercy and love.

It is why I love this painting. It shows us a different perspective of what crucifixion also means. Just as Salvador Dali's Christ of St John of the Cross shows the scene from God's perspective, as we look down on the bowed head of Jesus; so here, in this glowing, effervescent crucifixion fizzles and sparkles with God's love for the world. Even in the horror of death, even as the exterior of crucifixion is coloured by darkness, blood and despair, remember, some times, to

look to the interior of God's loving heart, and see the passion of God's love continuing to burn intensely for you and for me.

In the human coldness of Good Friday, the divine heat of God's love will rekindle, and burst into new light and flame, and we will be born anew.

Amen

ⁱ Sister Wendy Beckett, *The Art of Lent*, p90