

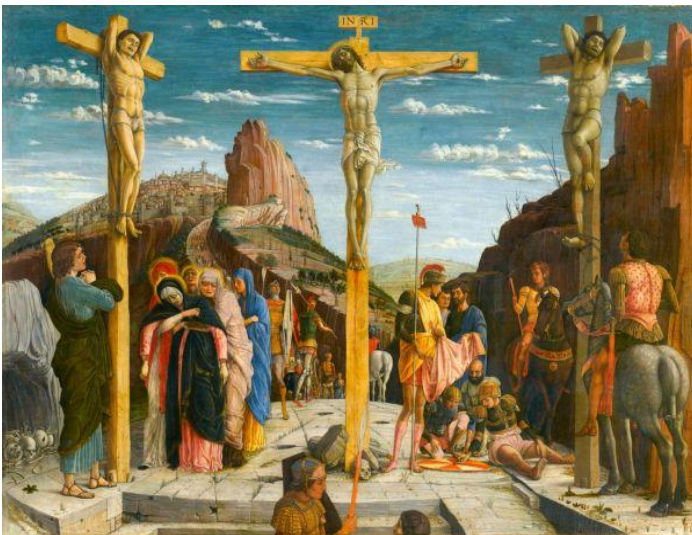
In the Middle

Good Friday; Series C

John 19:17-30

We heard the Passion of our Lord this evening. Interspersed between readings of the Passion of Jesus according to St. John, we sang verses of the hymn, “Sacred Head Now Wounded.” Through hearing and singing we were able to meditate upon the cross and the great cost of salvation. I want to take just a little bit of time in our sermon this evening to unfold the theme of compassion that we find in our reading of Jesus’ Crucifixion. I want to join the Passion narrative and the hymn with two pieces of artwork in order to demonstrate the theme of compassion and deepen our Good Friday reflection.

At first it seems a bit too obvious to say that the suffering and death of Jesus was a work of compassion. Elsewhere in his Gospel, the Evangelist St. John, tells us plainly, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16) and that “greater love hath no man than to give his life for a friend” (Jn 15:13). To say that God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer and die in our place to forgive our Sin and purchase the way of eternal life leads us to conclude *that Jesus’ suffering and death was a work of compassion*. But St. John’s crucifixion account gives us more evidence that points to Jesus’ work on the cross as a compassionate work.



Andrea Mantegna was a painter from Florence in the 15th century. One of his famous pieces is titled, *Crucifixion*. Mantegna, like most Florentine painters, sought to imitate the quality of antique sculpture and architecture in his paintings. Yet, unlike many of Mantegna’s contemporaries, he also cared deeply for historical accuracy. After studying *Crucifixion* one could agree that Mantegna pursued historical exactitude with the passionate devotion of an archeologist (Wikipedia, *Crucifixion*). For instance, he gives great attention to the accurate detail of the Roman soldiers’ equipment. He depicts the place of the crucifixion, a slab of pavement with holes for erecting crosses. He shows the site of Golgotha as being on the side of a main road leading out of Jerusalem. Mantegna provides a historically accurate

depiction of Golgotha as a regular place for crucifixions (*He Was Crucified*, pp. 99ff.). He also shows us the Christ who was crucified in the middle.

The first sign of compassion from St. John’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus is visually represented in Mantegna’s painting. St. John tells us “there they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them” (Jn 19:18). Jesus in the middle. So Mantegna shows us. He suffered a criminal’s death—becoming the worst criminal the world has ever seen by bearing the sin of all murders, criminals, thieves upon the cross (Luther). He came from heaven to earth to be the mediator—the one in the middle to bear the Father’s wrath over Sin. What compassion!

The second sign of compassion that we read in St. John's account and see in Mantegna's painting is the fact that the crucifixion was done in a prominent place. In John's Passion narrative we read that Pilate wrote an inscription and put it on the cross—"Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeorūm." That is, Latin for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (Jn 19:19-20). John tells us that the inscription was also written in Aramaic and in Greek, other common languages spoken at the time of Jesus. Many read the inscription because the place where Jesus was crucified was a prominent place, near the city of Jerusalem. People walked by and saw the Son of God sacrificed for them. And not only this but many saw and were able to read the name of this savior—information that likely came to the forefront of the minds of all those witnesses when they heard the rumors three days later of this Jesus of Nazareth's resurrection from the dead. And so the public nature of Jesus' sacrifice for the Sin of the world actually is evidence of our God's compassion.

The third sign of compassion that we read in St. John's Passion account and see in Mantegna's painting is in the form of words. We read that when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" (Jn 19:26). Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:27). Mantegna likely illustrates this scene to the left of the painting. With his dying breath, Jesus shares the fruit of his love and forgiveness as it produces compassion that binds human relationships together. Compassionate words and actions that flow from the cross.



Mantegna gives us a historically accurate, visual depiction of the crucifixion scene that John describes with words. Both of them make it quite clear. God has come to suffer and die in the middle for you. He has come to be the greatest criminal and thief the world has known to take the world's Sin upon himself and nail to the cross. Our Sin is unholy. God is holy. He cannot associate with un-holiness. Our Sin separates us from our Holy God. Where there is a gap in between you and God, Christ comes in the midst of that gap for you. After all, crucifixions left bodies suspended in the air. There—suspended in the midst of heaven and earth—the one who came from heaven above to earth, died for you. And not just for you but his compassionate sacrifice was for the whole world.

By taking a little bit of time this evening to unfold this theme of compassion through hearing, singing, and seeing, it is my prayer that our Good Friday reflection on the compassion and love of our God for you was deepened just a little bit more. Let us close by marveling our Lord's sacrifice the way one hymn writer does, "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul! What wondrous love is this, O my soul! What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul" (LSB 543)! Amen.