

The suffering of Jesus on Good Friday has been graphically depicted over the ages. Many of us have been moved by the images Mel Gibson gave us in his movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. But before movies were possible, other artists expressed their faith in Jesus and his cross in a variety of ways. I'd like to show you a few of these as one way to reflect on the scriptures, the mission of Jesus, his love for us, and what he expected his followers would face.

[1] Here is a very typical icon of the 13th century, from among a collection held on Mount Sinai. It shows Jesus twisted at the legs, but remarkably poised from the waist up. He is suffering, but he is at peace, even inviting the viewer to share his life. Standing sorrowfully below him are his mother and the disciple whom he loved. In John's gospel, the first words Jesus spoke from the cross made them mother and son. Above his head is the inscription ordered by Pilate, "Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews," an inscription Pilate refused to change when tormentors wanted it to say, "This man claimed to be the king of the Jews." Above the beams of the cross float two angels, their faces covered. According to Luke's gospel, an angel appeared at the Mount of Olives to strengthen Jesus, and according to Matthew's gospel, an angel rolled away the stone in front of the tomb, sat upon it, radiated light, struck fear in the guards, and calmed the visiting women with the first proclamation of the ultimate good news: "Jesus is not here. He has risen." This angel also commissioned the women to tell the good news to the other disciples. The angels in this painting have their faces veiled. It appears as though they too are weeping at the death of Jesus, but certainly they are also acting as the angels did in Isaiah chapter 6, where they covered their faces and their feet in the presence of the Lord sitting upon his throne, and they called out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Beneath the feet of Jesus is a skull, identifying the location as Golgotha, the place of the skull. An old tradition holds that the skull in question belonged to Adam, and that Jesus was put to death over the grave of the first human being. This artist probably wants us to remember St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where he tells us that all die in Adam, but all will be made alive in Christ. From the side of Jesus, blood and water pour forth, creating the new community of those who were baptized, broke bread and shared the cup in remembrance of him.

[2] About the same time as that icon, this mosaic of the crucifixion was created for the apse of San Clemente Church in Rome. It shows how the cross plays a central role in everyday life. Jesus stands confidently on a platform, his arms extended. [3] You wouldn't know he was crucified if the cross didn't appear behind him. His mother and the disciple he loved stand again at either side. But in this case 12 doves have alighted on the beams of the cross, representing the 12 apostles who would bring the message of the cross to the rest of the world. Way above Jesus is the creating hand of God the Father. Below him springs forth a plant unlike any other. Yes, Jesus said at the Last Supper in John's gospel, "I am the vine, and you are the branches," but did any of us ever imagine the branches to germinate, reach

up, subdivide, curl out, and embrace all of life as these do? The vine swirls around other plants, birds, vessels, and people performing ordinary actions from a typical workday. It is one of the most expressive depictions of the life that flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[4] Around the corner from that church is one that dates all the way back to the 5th century, and it boasts one of the oldest Christian mosaics in existence. It shows Jesus sitting on a sumptuous throne, the disciples gathered around his feet. They are gathered in front of buildings representing the heavenly Jerusalem, where Jesus rules as king. Above those buildings float four winged creatures who appear in the Book of Ezekiel and in the Book of Revelation. Traditionally they have been interpreted as signs of the four evangelists who so marvelously told the life of Jesus. The cross here is very different. Jesus is not on the cross at all. He is on a different throne. Instead, the cross is decorated with jewels. It shines from the back of the entire scene, radiating the light of the glory of God. This cross signals the glory of the resurrection.

[5] You may think all these images are old, and they are, but in the history of Christianity they are not. Instead, they came rather late, a few centuries after Jesus had died. The cross of Christ, which St. Paul tells the Corinthians was a stumbling block for Jews, was a stumbling block for many Christians as well. The painted the walls of the catacombs with images from the Old and New Testaments, including scenes from the life of Jesus, but not of his death. This image of the crucifixion was carved onto the wooden front door of Santa Sabina Church in Rome in the fifth century, making it one of the first attempts among Christians to show Jesus between the two thieves. He dominates the scene; in fact, the crosses are not at all clear. Instead, he seems to stand in front of scaffolding, already set free from the work of his enemies.

[6] But there is one last image of the cross I'd like to show you. It is even older than the ones we've just seen, and is the most startling of them all. It probably dates to the second century. It was carved into stone, and it is very hard to make out just what is going on. You can see a crucified figure in the upper part of the image, and a man on the left, then some writing below the two of them. This is a political cartoon, complete with a caption. It is very offensive to Christians, even today. It is hard to make out because it is so old and so crudely executed, so let me show you a line drawing of the same image. **[7]** Now you can that the figure on the cross has the head of an ass. Standing below him is a man named Alexamenos. We know that because of the caption, written in Greek, which says: "Alexamenos worships his God." It ridicules Jesus and the people who believed in him. To look at it today, you can still sense the hatred behind the carving, and you realize how much is at stake, how much Jesus risked by enduring the cross, and how much we risk by believing in him as our God.

[8] Today we take the cross for granted. We decorate with it. It shows up on walls, as jewelry, in landscapes and t-shirts. We need Good Friday every year to remind us about what the cross represents. It is the instrument of our salvation, the source of our life, the glory of God, the doorway to Christ, and the anchor that grounds us whenever we face ridicule or whenever we need to speak up to those who seek their own comfort rather than self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Martin Hellriegel, who served as pastor of Holy Cross Church in St. Louis for many years, put it this way: Every Christian should go through life head in the clouds, feet on the ground, and heart on the cross.