

Seeing Beyond

Reflections on art and Christian faith

Crucified tree form - the Agony
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Tempera and gouache on paper, 1959

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Jesus on the cross. Oh... or is it? No, it's just a tree, isn't it? A dead tree. And yet... I can't help but see Jesus. It's the kind of thing that sometimes happens: an ordinary situation, an unremarkable person, an everyday object, and suddenly Jesus pops out at us, suddenly we catch a glimpse of God. Just as Jesus said: "When you feed someone, when you clothe someone, when you visit them, then you've done that to me."

But back to the tree. It looks pretty dead to me. Like there was a huge storm a long time ago. Or a fire. It doesn't look like the kind of tree that is going to sprout new shoots from below any more. This tree is well and truly dead. Jesus, too, looks dead. His head, his arms hanging down, held up only by nails, bones and tendons. Three o'clock has passed, he has breathed his last and now it is just his empty body left hanging there. But for Jesus we know this is not the end. We know that three days later he rises again. What is dead now, will be filled with life again. Will be filled with everlasting life that overflows and gives life to others. And the tree? Well, perhaps it won't remain as dead as we think. Perhaps a bird will make its nest in the tree's hollow, hatch its eggs and bring new life into the world. Perhaps a climbing plant will use the tree as its support, as it reaches up to the light. Perhaps whole colonies of insects will make their home in this tree. Perhaps no matter how dead the tree looks, how dark our situation seems, how final the blow that has struck us down feels, perhaps there is always room for resurrection and for new life. Just as with Jesus.

What about the barbed wire? Jesus' crown of thorns, of course. But on the tree? Was this tree once part of a fence? Was it holding up a barbed wire fence? Stopping us from walking into the next field? Stopping us from walking towards God? Well, whatever kind of fence it was, both Jesus and that storm or fire have brought it down. As Jesus died, the curtain in the temple, separating the people from God tore in two. God was no longer separate or remote. And without that barbed wire fence, we are now free to head towards God, we are free to walk into that once forbidden field, we are free to tread on the holy ground. And it turns out the only reason that ground is holy, is because it is steeped in love.

So, as we nurse our wounds from the fires and storms that have ravaged our lives, let us head out beyond the tree towards the golden sunshine. Let us bask in its warming, healing rays. Let us be strengthened, comforted and filled with peace by God.

At first sight, this picture is just full of death and agony. And yet, I can't help but see beyond that the light, the life, the love of God.

Biblical References

Jesus' crucifixion ([Matthew 27:32-56](#), [Mark 15:21-41](#), [Luke 23:26-49](#), [John 19:16-30](#))

When you feed someone... ([Matthew 25:31-46](#))

Jesus' death at three o'clock ([Matthew 27:46-50](#), [Mark 15:33-37](#), [Luke 23:44-47](#))

Jesus' resurrection ([Matthew 28:1-10](#), [Mark 16:1-13](#), [Luke 24:1-49](#), [John 20:1-21:14](#))

Jesus' crown of thorns ([Matthew 27:29](#), [Mark 15:17](#), [John 19:2-5](#))

The temple curtain tearing in two ([Matthew 27:50-51](#), [Mark 15:37-38](#), [Luke 23:45-46](#))