

Seeing Beyond

Reflections on art and Christian faith

Rest on the Flight to Egypt
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Oil on canvas, 2003
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Here are Mary, Joseph and their baby, Jesus, having a rest as they flee their homeland, heading for Egypt. Here, in the midst of the stress, fear and tiring travel they have found a moment simply to be a family. For the parents to play with their baby, watch how it has grown, make it laugh and smile, take delight in the cuteness of a little infant.

The heat is clearly intense. Only dry arid desert all around, a cloudless sky from which the sun must be beating down. And yet, the tree has sprouted leaves and fruit. "Nature itself responds to God", the artist tells us. So nature brings its offering, its gift to this holy family, by way of shade and fruit, rest and restoration. How lucky and blessed this family is.

I wonder what pictures of refugees you have seen recently. Over the years I have seen many: people of all colours, travelling in all weathers and landscapes, by car, by train, by boat, on foot. As I write this, it includes people trying to get to Egypt, just like this little family. Some of them with little babies, too. But most are unsuccessful in their quest to get into Egypt, the border from Gaza remaining closed to all but a few. There doesn't seem to be much rest for these refugees. Food and water running out, buildings destroyed. Nature may be providing for this fleeing family here, but who is providing for the fleeing families in the real desert today?

I feel as though this painting should offer some sort of hope: that God will in some way provide for the fleeing families today. And, of course, in the midst of the horror of their plight, there is still the love and care that parents continue to give their children, the sharing of what meagre food and drink family and friends can find, the care and expertise that local and visiting doctors try to give to the sick and wounded. God's love as expressed through fellow humans isn't absent, even in the midst of a violent siege. And yet... I can't help feeling jealous of this holy family: they are receiving a gift denied to so many others.

The artist goes on to say that "God is to be found in everything around; in the clouds, the mountains, the trees and animals, even the stones and dust." Perhaps nature doesn't only "respond to God". Perhaps nature is also a way for God to respond to and provide for us? But so many fleeing families are surrounded by shattered townscapes bombed to smithereens where nature doesn't get a look-in. And those that start in nature are fleeing droughts and floods that bring only death and disease. Have we humans destroyed nature, and in so doing, cut off one of the ways for us to encounter God and for God to provide for us?

I wonder if this harmonious picture of rest and respite hides a sad truth of what we have done to our world and how we have made "Rest on the Flight to Egypt" much harder to find today.

Biblical References

Mary, Joseph and Jesus flee to Egypt ([Matthew 2:13-23](#))