

The Gospel according to St Matthew

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Meditation

This painting is by Fra' Angelico, a Dominican friar in the convent of San Marco in Florence. It is one of a series done for the friars' cells in that convent, to aid the friars meditate on scenes from the life of Christ. In the centre of this painting we see the image of Christ, dressed in white, seated before a plain undecorated wall, on which hangs a green cloth of state. His eyes are blindfolded with some thin material that allows us to clearly see the outline of his closed eyes and nose. On his head is a crown of thorns and behind his head is a cruciform halo. In his right hand he holds a segmented staff and in his left hand what appears to be an orb. In other words, he is shown as a king, but a suffering king. The image of the king crowned with thorns is certainly in the tradition of prior images of the Mocking. However, around his head we can see what are without doubt the most intriguing elements of this picture. Instead of seeing his tormentors, standing by, we see only the parts of them that are causing the torment. There are four disembodied hands; two on either side, and all of them are right hands. On the right of the picture, one hand is raised as if preparing to strike him, while another right hand hits him with a rod. On the left side one hand reaches up to pull his beard, while another, palm towards us, prepares to slap him. And, perhaps most exceptional of all, a disembodied head (presumably the owner of the beard pulling hand) launches spittle at him. Meanwhile, the head's disembodied left hand mockingly raises his hat.

We thus see the Mocking in this painting, whereas the blindfolded Christ only feels it. Whilst this episode has been painted by many artists, this is unique in its depiction. The reason becomes clear when we look at the whole picture; at the base is Mary, Jesus' mother, on one side. On the other is a Dominican bent over his book, reading. The Dominicans (named after their founder, St Dominic)

concentrated their work on learning, writing and teaching, and prized the method of reading in which the scene is imagined in your mind's eye, as if you were in the scene itself, watching what is happening. The Mocking has often been painted in many different genres, but the common feature tends to be the brutal, bestial faces of the tormentors, and the energy with which they beat and torture the bound Christ.

Fra' Angelico's painting here is on the surface much more restrained, but perhaps for that all the more powerful. It gives us the tools with which to use our own imagination – and that can be the most chilling thing of all.