

The Gospel according to St Matthew

And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’” The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.⁵² The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Meditation

After the drama of the walk to Calvary, the place of execution, Matthew's account of the crucifixion begins very matter-of-factly; Jesus was crucified. The drama is provided by those around him; the Romans, the Jewish bystanders, those who taunt, tempt and revile him. And his friends and disciples and mother, watching on in horror, both not wanting to see what is happening, but feeling they must be there for him. Even the two bandits crucified with him revile him too – in other Gospels only one does, the other at the end believing Jesus' claims. Matthew saves the most drama for what happens immediately after Jesus' death; the curtain of the Temple is torn - Jesus' death, his sacrifice on the Cross, now makes the Temple sacrifices redundant; the earth shook and rocks split open – at the cataclysmic event that had just taken place, and as part of the mourning creation; the 'saints' burst out of their tombs – prefiguring Jesus' resurrection, and the resurrection of Christians due to the saving death of Christ.

But in this painting the drama is over. The soldiers, the Jews, the baying crowd, and most of Jesus' supporters are returning to Jerusalem, away in the distance, where people will get on with their lives again. The last to leave were the women who came to support Mary and Jesus. Only Jesus' mother and John – the disciple whom Jesus loved – remain. They are alone, in a different world, left with their grief, their despair, their questions. Better than any other depiction of the scene that I know, it shows the complete and utter depths of despair of them both. Mary is no longer fainting and crying; she sits, not looking at Jesus, lost in her own thoughts and memories; hopes and dreams for the future of her son dashed, remembering events from his life, things that she had 'treasured up in her heart'. John is looking up at the dead Christ with arms outstretched; his questioning face can be interpreted in so many ways. In their suffering, their alone-ness, they represent all those who feel that the strength of their suffering is not felt or understood by others. It is the suffering of many in the face of the death of a loved one; the suffering of the 'small' people, helpless and hopeless in the face of the self-interested politics of the rich and powerful; the suffering of all those who love God, faced with evil, sin and death; the eternal question: 'Why?'

And Jesus, high, high above it all. His face is, for now, without expression.

