

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

Perhaps Bacon regretted the fact that he never got round to painting the cross, but I feel the paintings are more powerful for standing alone. This piece shines the spotlight on the viewers of the crucifixion, and allows us to examine this both alone and in relation to other grief in our lives. It is a bridge between the grief experienced by those who stood at the foot of the cross and the grief we all know, or will know eventually. Because we are all at the foot of the cross, whether or not we see a crucifix and whether or not we are paying attention to the Gospel story.

The piece, which is now in the free collection displays at Tate Britain in London, was created in a fortnight's burst of energy in 1944; it was first exhibited the following year, coinciding with the discovery of the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps and giving it a terrible, and topical, meaning. But its message is rooted in Bacon's own story as well as the wider events; his own rocky existence, punctuated by wild living and reckless drinking, meant he was experiencing the reality he was painting; later in his life, he said he only ever painted for himself, and in an attempt to work through the presence of violence and suffering in his own (but also everyone's) existence. None of his works does a finer job of achieving that than this piece.

Mass text

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Proclaim a joyful sound and let it be heard; proclaim to the ends of the earth: The Lord has freed his people, alleluia.

FIRST READING Acts 8:5-8. 14-17

PSALM Psalm 65

RESPONSE **Cry out with joy to God all the earth.**

Or **Alleluia!**

1. Cry out with joy to God all the earth,
O sing to the glory of his name.
O render him glorious praise.
Say to God: "How tremendous your deeds!" **R.**
2. "Before you all the earth shall bow;
shall sing to you, sing to your name!"
Come and see the works of God,
tremendous his deeds among men. **R.**
3. He turned the sea into dry land,
they passed through the river dry-shod.
Let our joy then be in him;
he rules for ever by his might. **R.**
4. Come and hear, all who fear God.
I will tell what he did for my soul:
Blessed be God who did not reject my prayer
nor withhold his love from me. **R.**

SECOND READING 1 Peter 3:15-18

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
Jesus said: "If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him."
Alleluia!

GOSPEL John 14:15-21

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

If you love me, keep my commandments, says the Lord, and I will ask the Father and he will send you another Paraclete, to abide with you for ever, alleluia.

Next Sunday's Readings:

Acts 1:12-14
1 Peter 4:13-16
John 17:1-11

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FRANCIS BACON, *THREE STUDIES FOR FIGURES AT THE BASE OF A CRUCIFIXION*



Divine images



Joanna Moorhead looks at a striking work of modern art.

The first thing to say about Francis Bacon's crucifixion triptych is this: there is no crucifixion. No cross; no figure of Christ; no nails. No guards; no loincloth; no INRI. The word is that Bacon intended to paint, one day, the crucifixion to go above the triptych, but he never did. So the piece exists alone, a series of figures at the foot of the cross, but with no crucifix to be seen – despite the fact that Bacon was fascinated by the crucifixion as an image and as a symbol, and returned to it time and again throughout his career.

But what extraordinary figures these three are; and how much their presence reveals. Because their body language – and really, all they are is precisely that, body language – cries out to the heavens of their grief, their agony, their desolation, their suffering. Bacon has painted them against a burnt orange backdrop and there is something searing about that; the urgency of the colour emphasises the terrible vitality of the emotions. This is a tragedy so visceral that all it is is visceral: each figure betrays her or his grief in a different contortion, a different twist of the body, a different desperate lunge. The creature on the left is bent over double; the middle figure is blindfolded and open-mouthed; the form on the right is simply an ear and a screaming mouth.

What are we when we suffer so deeply? Bacon's figures are as animal-like as they are human; a timely reminder that we humans are animals too, and it is our animal instincts that come to the fore in the dreadfulness of grief. Loss is more than in the mind; it actually hurts to lose someone you love. You feel it in your heart, in your gut, in your lungs. You cry out with the pain; you are driven half-mad with the impossibility of it. There is nowhere to escape; and Bacon's figures have realised this, and are demonstrating it.

17 MAY 2020

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II