

Jasper



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Painting of the day:

The Last Supper by Tintoretto (1594)

Do you kneel to receive the Lord in Communion?

That's what we did when I was a small boy. There was a marble rail that went from one end of the sanctuary to the other, with an open space in the middle so the priest and the altar boys didn't have to hop over it to get out. You walked in line, as people do now, but when you got to the front you waited until a place along the rail was clear, and then you knelt.

You folded your hands in prayer. But have you ever noticed that when a lot of different people are doing the same thing, they don't all do it in the same way? That's why we watch them. So you would glance over to the side, where the priest was coming with the altar boy and giving Communion to the people kneeling, one after the other.

"Oh, I'm supposed to be praying!" you say, because you're a good boy or girl, but still you look. See, there's Susie with the pony tail. She's not like her sister. And that must be her mother. Who is the old man with the funny hairs sticking out of his ear? He seems like a

nice old man.

"Oh, I'm supposed to be praying," you say, because the priest and the altar boy are getting closer. And your heart starts to beat a little quicker. There are two reasons for that. One is that you are receiving the Lord, and the priest will tell you so, in Latin, and that is a grand thing. I'm certainly not worthy of it. The



other is that you are going to open your mouth and let him place the host on your tongue, and there's sometimes a little thought in the back of your head, that you'll be clumsy or the old priest will be clumsy, and the host will go tumbling. That is why the altar boy, with one hand over his heart, is coming along with the priest, holding a golden platter underneath your chin, just in case.

I don't think the priests ever picked for

that job the boys who were best at catching a baseball, but I suppose it wouldn't have hurt.

Oh – I should mention this too. You might have thought, “Ten more minutes till breakfast!” That was because, in those days, you had to fast from midnight till when you received Communion. So your belly might be rumbling a little.

When I kneel next to people, I feel close to them. I can see them when they receive. I can see the sides of their faces. And everybody is pretty much on the same level. The tall boy doesn't look so tall, and that little kid whose chin barely makes it over the rail doesn't look so little.

But when I got a few years older, the men came to our church with sledge hammers and saws, and they smashed the rail and took the rubble away. People were saying that

Communion was supposed to be more like a family meal, and not like something hushed and holy. I guess that family meal in church did not include flicking a strand of spaghetti at your sister. But the old way really did give you the feeling of belonging to a big family. You might think of that old man with the hairy ears as your next door neighbor's uncle. He was waiting for the holy bread, just as you were.

“But what about the painting!” you say. Thank you for reminding me.

You know the scene. Jesus and his apostles are celebrating the Passover supper, on the night before he was nailed to the cross and died for our sins. When they were about to eat, Jesus said the blessing that Jews always said at supper, and then he broke the bread and blessed it, and said, “Take and eat. This is my Body, which will be given up for you.”

When you are sitting with your family at

the supper table, and you get a hankering for something that will fill the hole in your belly, you may say, “Mom, may I have another helping of spaghetti?” And she says, “Billy, where does it go?” But she smiles and passes the platter over to you. And that is a little like how most painters showed the Last Supper. Jesus breaks the bread, and the apostles pass it around. But that's not what Jesus is doing in this painting. Do you see? Jesus is a priest here, and he is giving the Eucharist to the apostle, just as the priest does in church. He is placing the bread in his mouth.

Tintoretto wanted to show what was really going on at that first Eucharist. It's the same thing that has happened at every Mass since then. It's the real world. Do you see the cleaning ladies and the big empty jars and the rooster on the other side of the painting? They are real, too. You could take a picture of them, if you

had a camera. But they are not the only real things. A rock is real, and you can take a picture of it, or hold it in your hand, or toss it at the window of an abandoned garage, just to hear the glass shatter. A thought is real, too, though you can't take a picture of it. A thought is more important than a rock. It is more real than a rock. You can pound on the rock until it's nothing but powder. But you can't do that to a thought. You can't do that to your soul. You can't do that to the grace of God.

Jesus is really there when you receive him in Communion. Do you see the smoke from the lamps above the table? What do those shapes remind you of? They remind me of angels, the messengers of God. Tintoretto wasn't saying that angels were made of smoke. But have you ever had the funny sense that there was somebody right beside you, so real that you could touch him, but when you turned around

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there was nobody? At least nobody visible to your eyes. That is like the smoke in the painting. The angels are there. You see the altar boy with his shoelaces untied. But your eyes miss angels who minister at every Mass because they love the Lord and they pray for us, and they celebrate his giving himself to us in Communion. Tintoretto is trying to teach us not to miss the angels.

Every Christian hopes to see Jesus one day, face to face. And that is when we will see all the other tremendous things our eyes now miss. We might have that same funny feeling all over again, and turn around quick, and see a young man smiling a little and nodding. “You’re right, that was me, that day when you were trying to get the ball out of the tree and you fell out of your bedroom window and something broke your fall, though nobody could figure out what it was,” he says, and you shake your guardian’s hand, and you look around more and more, and see the real world for the first time, full of roosters – and what colors!

There is one man in Tintoretto’s painting who is not going to have that vision. He’s not going to know the real world. Can you pick him out? He is on the wrong side of the table, scowling and grabbing on to a pouch full of coins. He says, “I don’t see anything special going on here.” Maybe he is lying, and he does see it, though he hates it. You don’t want to be on the wrong side of the table with him. His name is Judas.

Who is the apostle who is receiving the

Lord right now? I don’t think it’s Saint John. He’s the boy who is behind Jesus. You can tell, because he doesn’t yet have a beard. I don’t think it’s Saint Peter. My guess is that he’s the older man with a white beard, standing in back. I’d like to think that it is Thomas the Hesitator. You may remember him. He’s the one who hesitated after Jesus rose from the dead. He didn’t believe the rest of the apostles. He said, “I’ll only believe if I can put my fingers into the wounds in his hands, and my hand into the wound in his side.” So when Jesus came to the apostles again, he took Thomas’s hands and showed him that his flesh was real flesh, and he was really risen from the dead. Said Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

Which is what you should say to yourself at Mass when the priest raises the host at the consecration, and the altar boy rings the bell. That is because it really is so. Tintoretto the painter can show us. He had the eyes of faith to see.

By the way, you might think that Tintoretto is a funny name. His real name was Jacopo Robusti, which sort of means, in Italian, James the Hulk. But he wasn’t. He was a little guy, so they gave him the nickname Tintoretto – the Little Guy who Colors.



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