



Painting of the day:

The Crucifixion

by Andrea Mantegna

When Jesus was stripped and nailed to the cross, the gospels tell us, some of the Roman soldiers took his cloak, but when they saw that it had no seams, but was woven in one piece, they decided not to tear it, but to throw dice to see who would get the whole thing. You see, that was how executioners made a little extra profit on the side. They would literally strip the man of everything he had, and a fine cloak was nothing to sneer at.

It could be that Jesus' cloak was dyed a special color, such as the reddish purple that was for royalty. A Roman senator got to wear a purple sash across his toga. Kings in the ancient world are portrayed as wearing purple. When Agamemnon the Greek general walks on a purple tapestry, he is doing something that marks him out for destruction, for being proud and arrogant. It would be like spitting on gold, or rolling toilet paper around the Washington Monument. The purple color was rare and hard to produce. The people whom the Romans called *Punici*, which meant, in Latin, *the purple-makers*, made it their specialty.

We call them the Phoenicians. They were seafaring men and merchants, and some of them were fishermen in the Mediterranean Sea, where they would trawl up a certain kind of shellfish by the thousands. This shellfish, called the *murex*, no

bigger than your knuckle, would make a couple of drops of red dye when you crushed it. So you can guess why it was so costly to have an entire robe, fit for a grown man, that had been steeped in that dye.

Can you see the men throwing dice for Jesus' robe? They are to the right, using what looks like a wheel divided into colors, red and yellow. I'm not sure which one was supposed to be the lucky color. One of the soldiers is a young beardless man with a foolish smile on his face. He does not have the slightest idea what is really going on a few feet away from him. Another is a bald man with a burly black beard. He's probably a barbarian, since Roman men in the time of Jesus were clean shaven.



He too is enjoying himself, and he too looks rather like an idiot.

Who are these people? The painter Mantegna might say to us, "Don't you know them? Don't you meet them every day? Those people are us." The

sacrifice of Christ upon the cross was for us and is for us, every day of our lives, but mostly we live as if it were a universe away from us, and long ago, and we go about our business looking about as intelligent as that soldier with his big awkward legs splayed out on the ground.

But there is a soldier here who does know what is going on. Can you find him?

Yes, there he is, holding a shield and a lance. He is not with the other soldiers. He is not really with anybody. Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the apostle John are together, with the poor mother of Jesus fainting in her grief. This soldier might, some day in the future, join with them in prayer, but right now he is seeing something he has never seen before, and learning the truth for the first time. “Now while these things were happening,” says Saint Luke, “one of the centurions looking on said, Surely this man was the son of God.”

Someone might say that he said it only because of the violent storm and the earthquake. But everyone has witnessed a violent storm, and in that part of the world earthquakes, while they don’t happen every day or even every year, do happen now and then. Besides, a Roman centurion, a man in charge of a hundred soldiers, is not going to be afraid of lightning. Mantegna doesn’t portray it that way. This man looks up to Jesus in an attitude of wonder and worship. Everyone else is going about their business as if nothing had happened. Everyone else is about as knowledgeable as the rear end of that horse that you see about to disappear below the bend in the road on the hill. But God has granted the centurion the gift of seeing the truth.

When the angel of the Lord told the prophet Elijah that the Lord would be passing by, there came to him on the mountain a series of loud and impressive upheavals of the earth and the air – fire and storm and whirlwind and trembling of the earth under your feet. But the Lord was not in any of them. Finally there came a gentle whispering sound, a “still small voice,” and Elijah in awe hid his face in his cloak, because the Lord was there.

You may sometimes see a movie with one gunshot and explosion after another, and it really is kind of boring, and if you left the room for ten minutes and came back, it would seem as if you had not left at all, because it would still be gunshots and explosions. Mantegna knew the gospels. He knew that there would come a terrible storm and an earthquake, but he wanted to show instead, beforehand, the earthquake in a single human heart. It is the heart of the centurion. Saint Mark says that on that mysterious night of Jesus’ death, graves themselves opened, and the dead appeared to many. We may say that Mantegna painted the quiet earthquake, which is the most powerful of all. For the centurion, a pagan, a man used to bloodshed and violence, a man who had probably seen without any emotion the executions of hundreds of criminals, was having his dead heart broken up in the storm, and his soul, dead in sin, would be brought to life again.

That is what Mantegna has painted, in the pose and his eyes of the silent centurion. It is the coming to life of a human soul.



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