

24 JUNE 2007 – PROPER 7

Galatians 3:23-29

The hermeneutical centre of our reading this week is ‘Christ Jesus’ who is not only Israel’s Messiah but also the only organic union between Israel and the Church, in whom all humanity has access to the one Father through the one Spirit. Not only are believers made children (‘sons’) of God ‘in Christ Jesus’, and baptised ‘into Christ’ and so have ‘put on Christ’, but through faith ‘in Christ Jesus’ believers are ‘all one’. All distinctions that once divided us have been removed so that we are now part of the Father’s great family. Rung by rung, Jesus dismantled the ladder of hierarchy that had marked the approach to God. He invited defectives, sinners, aliens, and Gentiles—the unclean, the failures and the disgraces of society—to God’s banquet table. Didn’t Isaiah prophesy of a great banquet to which all nations would be invited? And at that banquet, shall not all people join hands in a great dance not unlike that wonderful 1910 painting by Henri Matisse, *The Dance*?

In his 1982 oil on canvas *A Short History of Modernist Painting*, North American artist Mark Tansey depicts three approaches to painting that artists have embraced since the Renaissance. On the far left, Tansey paints a glass window to encapsulate the Renaissance ideal of viewing art as if one were looking through a window. The centre image depicts a man pushing his head, indeed his whole body, against a brick wall. This is Tansey’s commentary on much modernist formalism that alleged that a painting should be considered as an object in its own right. The third image in the triptych depicts a hen at the top of her ramp looking at herself in the mirror. This image depicts something of our postmodernist obsession with the self.

In contrast to Tansey’s images, believers in Christ Jesus are called to see in him neither a window through which one views the ‘real’ stuff of life, nor as an object in his own right in no relation to anyone or anything else. Neither are we called to see, when we gaze upon Christ, a reflected glorified version of the self. In all three of Tansey’s images, the subject and the object are detached. Conversely, the Apostle Paul reminds us that ‘as many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ’, and now find their personal and corporate identity in him. In Jesus Christ, subject and object become one. This does not mean that all distinction is subsumed or blurred. It does mean that no longer can one be seen or understood apart from the other. In Jesus Christ, God and humanity have become partakers of one another’s natures—forever.

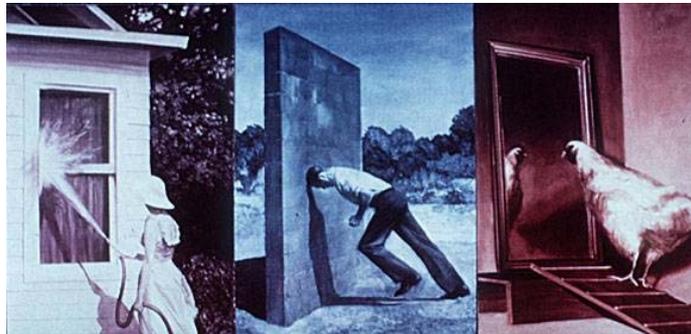
An image that comes to mind when I think of what it means for us to be ‘in Jesus Christ’ is that of the matryoshka doll—a set of dolls of decreasing sizes and of the same substance,¹ but all painted uniquely, placed one inside another. Of the manifold stories about the origin of matryoshka dolls, the most gruesome involves a northern Russian woodsman named Mushkin. In a time of great famine, Mushkin decided that his survival depended on cannibalism. After eating his family, he was plagued with guilt and imagined the souls of his family members inside himself. This idea spawned the creation of the matryoshka. Whatever we make of this story, the truth remains that our true identity can only be found in relationship with others, and for Christians, ultimately in relationship with Jesus Christ. We are found, clothed, covered, renewed, rebirthed, baptised, joined together, *in him*. Just as no longer does Christ see himself apart from us, we ought never see ourselves apart from him. ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ ... ‘For we are indeed his offspring’ (Acts 17:28).

Something of this is illustrated in two of Rembrandt’s paintings which hang in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The most well known of the two is the 1668/69 oil on canvas—*The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Arguably the best sermon ever preached on Luke 15:11–32, the painting depicts heaven and earth being brought together in the father’s embrace of the younger son. If we are prepared to see in that younger son not initially ourselves but the only begotten Son who left the security of the Father’s home to go into the

lostness and besmirchment of our sin in order to carry us home (even those hardnosed older brothers), then we may grasp something more of the richness of what Paul had in mind when he spoke of us being ‘in’ the One who has so identified himself with us that we can no longer identify ourselves or others apart from him.

But there is another work of Rembrandt’s, slightly less well known, that is also worth reflecting on—a 1642 work, *The Reconciliation of David and Absalom*. Unlike some other depictions of this story (2 Samuel 13-14) where the two figures are set in contrasting prose, Rembrandt so entwines the two figures that they merge at places into a single body. Also of significance is Rembrandt’s hiding of Absalom’s face in David’s breast. Only David’s face is shown. Rembrandt is content to show only Absalom’s back as he comes broken and sobbing. There is in this painting only one pair of eyes, those of the father, which look down upon his son with an affectionate and forgiving glance. But there is no undermining of Absalom’s dignity here, or shaming of his person. Conversely, his own majesty is found only in his Majesty’s strong embrace. Such is the love of God.²

Jason A. Goroncy



Mark Tansey

A Short History of Modernist Painting, 1982

Oil on canvas, three panels, each 147.32 cm x 101.6 cm



Rembrandt van Rijn

The Reconciliation of David and Absalom, 1642

Oil on wood

Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

¹ There is a sense in which we must speak of Jesus as being of the same substance as any other human person, though we ought be careful how we proceed here.

² This love is given voice to in the poem by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, ‘The Reconciliation of David and Absalom’, which is

based on Rembrandt's painting of the same title. Marilyn C. McEntyre, *Drawn to the Light: Poems on Rembrandt's Religious Paintings* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 35.