

## **Blessed Are the Peacemakers**

### **Kevin Heider**

Hi, my name is Kevin Heider. I'm a singer, songwriter, performer and recording artist. I also work with video graphic design and I have a podcast. If you've never seen one of my presentations for these Pray More Online Retreats, it's going to work like this. In just a moment, I am going to disappear and for the remainder of this video you'll be looking at a work of art, a painting that we are going to reflect on. And if that seems a little cheesy or lame to you please give it a shot. I like the arts. I enjoy all things creative. I am a storyteller at heart. And that's something that I've really come to appreciate more and more about Christ. He was a storyteller. He communicated transcendent truths through parables. In some of His more well-known stories, characters are murdered, or they're beaten and left for dead. They're handed over to be tortured. A man abandons his family and squanders his inheritance. Jesus' parables often revolve around acts of violence.

### **Anything but Regal**

This painting that you're looking at right now is not the one we'll be discussing, but as you can clearly see, it depicts the violence that Christ suffered in the hours before His crucifixion. He's bound and bloody. I recently posted this image on Instagram posing this question in the caption: How comfortably does this concept of king fit your worldview? Christ totally flipped the script on what it means to be a king. His crown was anything but regal. His garments were soaked in blood. He is not a king who hoards wealth and wields an army so that He can hold some earthly throne. He does not inflict violence. Rather, He endures it for our sake. If you're Catholic, you're familiar with the imagery. But sometimes I think that we're so strangely accustomed to seeing the image of a battered corpse nailed to a cross hanging over our bedroom doorframes and from our rear-view mirrors that we take for granted the horror of what's being depicted. I think the same could be said of both suffering and art. That when we allow ourselves to enter into it, it becomes a mirror. It reflects some part of ourselves back to us.

And so, in its own unique way, this presentation is an artistic exploration of Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Beatitudes. The work that we are going to reflect on here was completed in 1564 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Pieter Bruegel the Elder was a master of Dutch and Flemish Renaissance painting. His work is stunning. As for the painting that we'll be reflecting on here, I want to show it to you before I tell you what it's called. But before we do any of that, let us pray for mercy.

### **Opening Prayer**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul, my God, in You I trust. Make known to me your ways, Lord; teach me Your paths. Guide me by Your fidelity and teach me, for You are God my savior, for You I wait all the day long. Remember no more the sins of my youth; remember me according to Your mercy, because of your goodness, Lord. Amen.

## The Procession to Calvary

If you've never seen this painting before, you're welcome to pause the video here and take a closer look in silence for a moment. What's the first thing you noticed? There's clearly a lot going on in this scene, so many people doing so many different things. What was the first detail that popped out at you? What was the first particular that pulled you in? I ask because the first time I saw this painting, I thought one, that it was amazing; and two, that it was somewhat overwhelming. I didn't know what to think or where I was supposed to look. I felt like I couldn't focus on any one detail long enough to make sense of what was happening. A cursory glance at the expansive scene reveals all kinds of characters. There are uniformed men on horseback. There's a city wall in the background. There's a towering stone structure with a mill on top. There are peasants interacting with one another all over the place. Off in the distance, it appears as though a crowd has formed a circle. But, around what? And speaking of circles, what are these strange wheels on top of the poles? There are several scattered about.

One in the foreground and some in the background. What are they? What is happening here? The title of this painting is "The Procession to Calvary". And if you focus your eyes right on the center of the canvas, you'll see it. Christ carrying His cross. He's fallen beneath the weight of it. It helps to be able to zoom in on it here, watching on our tiny digital devices. It would be much easier to get a closer look at the details of this painting if we were standing in front of the real thing. The original is currently on display at a museum in Vienna, Austria and it is approximately four feet tall by five and a half feet wide. For now, we'll have to settle for slightly pixelated zooms in order to appreciate the details.

## Anachronistic Details

So, here we have Christ at the center, at the very heart of the painting. And now that we've seen Him, the sun illuminates all else. The other particulars come into the light. As the title of the painting indicates, Christ is making His procession to Calvary. Here, the crowd of people off in the distance have come to watch this public execution, have formed a circle around two crosses. One for each thief to be hung on either side of Christ who now carries the third cross. And since they're not yet up on their own crosses, where are the two thieves? Well, rather than carrying their own crosses the two thieves are being carted to their death. Here they are in front of Christ, on the way. If you look closely at the two thieves, you'll notice that one of them appears to be holding a crucifix while the other is looking longingly, desperately up to the heavens and both thieves appear to be confessing their sins to priests while being carted to their crosses. Now, these details could be considered anachronistic. If you're unfamiliar with the term, an anachronism is a thing belonging to a period other than that in which it appears.

If this is Christ's procession to Calvary, then it makes no chronological sense for the thieves to be clutching crucifixes and confessing their sins to priests. On the other hand, if this entire landscape, including the people, is of the Netherlands in the 16th century, then it makes no chronological sense for Christ to be there carrying His cross. At face value, taken literally, the whole painting seems full of these anachronisms of people and things placed outside of their own proper historical context.

And this is precisely why I find Pieter Bruegel's work so stunningly profound. He is considering the crucifixion of Christ with all its implications in light of the violence of his own day. Two years before Bruegel completed "The Procession to Calvary", he painted this similarly stunning work called "The Triumph of Death".

## The Triumph of Death

It's a reflection on the reality that death comes for us all. The Latin phrase you may be familiar with is "memento mori", remember your death. As we're told every year on Ash Wednesday, "remember man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This painting, "The Triumph of Death", is on display at the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain. I've been there and it was amazing. The museum offers this description of the painting on its website. It is a quote, "Moral work that shows the triumph of death over worldly things, symbolized through a great army of skeletons devastating the earth. All social classes are included in the composition, without power or devotion being able to save them." End quote. Rich, poor middle-class, privileged, impoverished, whatever; death comes for us all. We know this. We begin Lent by remembering our death. Lent culminates in a death; the horrific and violent crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday. We spend Holy Saturday in the darkness of the tomb and the chaos of grief. But all of it, all the violence remembered, is oriented, ultimately, towards the hope of resurrection.

## On the Waterfront

In the 1954 film "On the Waterfront," a priest played by Karl Malden has been called to the docks to bless the body of a man who was just killed by the mob. And in one of the most powerful speeches in the history of cinema, the priest likens his death to a crucifixion.

"I came down here to keep a promise. I gave Kayo my word that if he stood up to the mob, I'd stand up with him all the way. And now Kayo Dugan is dead. He was one of those fellows who had the gift for standing up. This time they fixed him. They fixed him for good this time, unless it was an accident like big Mac says. Some people think the crucifixion only took place on Calvary. They'd better wise up. Taking Joey Doyle's life to stop him from testifying is a crucifixion. Dropping a sling on Kayo Dugan because he was ready to spill his guts tomorrow, that's a crucifixion. And every time the mob puts the pressure on a good man, tries to stop him from doing his duty as a citizen, it's a crucifixion. And anybody who sits around and lets it happen, keeps silent about something he knows has happened, shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of Our Lord to see if He was dead. 'Go back to your church, Father.' Boys, this is my church. And if you don't think Christ is down here on the waterfront, you've got another guess coming! 'Get off this dock, Father!'"

## He Bears the Weight of Our Violence

I love this speech. I cannot recommend this film enough. And I think that this priest in "On the Waterfront" is making the same point that Pieter Bruegel was making when he painted "The Procession to Calvary". That in every age, Christ bears the weight of all our violence. In the

landscape presented in "The Procession to Calvary", we can see almost an entire grove of these poles with wheels mounted on top. But what are they? Well, we can use Bruegel's previous work, "The Triumph of Death" to give us some insight here. You can see the same strange devices but, in this painting, there are bodies, corpses on top of the wheels. This was essentially one version of an instrument used for torture and execution known as the breaking wheel, or the execution wheel. It was used in many parts of Christian Europe throughout the Middle Ages and its use wasn't outlawed everywhere until less than 200 years ago. But, these wheels, these terrible instruments of death and capital punishment, are depicted, I believe, as Bruegel's attempt to unite the unjust and barbaric violence of his day with the unjust and barbaric crucifixion of Christ.

## A Depiction of the Cross

Seen in this light, the towering wheel that stands near the foreground, represents the cross of Christ. At the top, we see remnants of the garment stripped from its victim. Clutching the foot of this cross are John, the beloved disciple, a woman weeping for her Lord, and a soldier overseeing it all. On the ground at the very base of this cross is the skull of an animal, for Golgotha means, "The place of the skull." And to the left of that symbol, at the very foreground of the painting, is someone you may not even have noticed at all yet. Mary, the mother of Jesus, mourning the suffering and death of her son. It's all right there.

The violence of the past colliding with the violence of Bruegel's present. And there's so much happening in the midst of it all. So many distractions that keep our eyes wandering, that keep us from focusing on Christ at the center, that keep us from considering the true weight of violence or from noticing when those right in front of us are hurt or grieving from it. There are so many distractions happening all around us that unless we stop and pay attention, we lose sight of our humanity, we forget our call to Christian witness, we miss the point of the great drama and our role in it.

## Fratelli Tutti

In his latest encyclical "Fratelli tutti", Pope Francis spends 30 whole paragraphs, that's over 10% of the encyclical, reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan. He asks us to consider who we are in that story. Are we the man robbed and beaten, thrown in a ditch and left for dead? Are we the characters who simply pass by and for whatever reason, do nothing? Or are we the character who sees that an injustice has occurred and resolves to make it right? The Pope writes quote, "We have seen, descending on our world, the dark shadows of neglect and violence in the service of petty interests of power, gain and division. The parable, then, asks us to take a closer look at the passers-by, the nervous indifference that makes them pass to the other side of the road, whether innocently or not, whether the result of disdain or mere distraction, makes the priest and the Levite a sad reflection of the growing gulf between ourselves and the world around us. There are many ways to pass by at a safe distance. We can retreat inwards, ignore others, or be indifferent to their plight." End quote.

## Finding Yourself in the Parable

Christ calls the Samaritan good because he was the one who showed mercy. And Jesus says, "To all who are willing to listen, go and do likewise." The approach that Pope Francis takes with the parable of the Good Samaritan, is a fine approach to take with this painting, with any depiction of The Passion, for that matter. It's an examination of conscience to ask, "Who am I in this parable? Who am I in this painting?" Think of a time in your life when you felt trapped beneath the weight of your cross. Think of all the people, friends, family, strangers who noticed that you were hurting, who wept with you, who prayed for you, who offered to help you bear the load. Remember their kindness and mercy. Give thanks for them. Then, go and do likewise. And all who may have contributed to your suffering, who looked the other way or passed right on by, who added to your pain, or neglected to console you in a time of grief, can you find it in your heart to forgive as Christ forgives, to love your enemies and pray for those who have persecuted you? In Bruegel's day, as in Christ's, public executions were often observed as community spectacles.

### Saint Ignatius of Antioch

Before he was martyred around 140 AD, before he was thrown into the arena to be devoured by wild beasts in front of the crowd that had gathered to revel in the violent spectacle, Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the Christian community in Rome, in which he pleaded with them not to intervene on his behalf. He wrote quote, "Allow me to become food for the wild beasts through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may be found, the pure bread of Christ." End quote.

It is, thus, in Bruegel's painting that the mill stands atop the highest parapet, wherein the Divine Miller, whom we cannot see, the invisible hand of God waits to grind the grain into flour, to make the bread which will feed the multitudes once this Eucharistic procession to Calvary is complete. In every age, Christ bears the weight of all our violence. Let us take this to heart, this Lent, that we may never take what He endured for granted, that we may grow ever more conscious of the suffering around us and of how best to help others bear it, that life may come from death once more, and for all, by the work of human hands in imitation of the Christ who proclaimed on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."