

The Cross

Chris Griffiths

One of my favourite paintings, a print of which I was unlucky enough to mislay in a long-ago house move, is *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543). You may have seen the original at the National Gallery in London. It hangs imposingly, the two emissaries from France to the Tudor Court of King Henry VIII seemingly gazing down at us through the ages. They are surrounded by instruments depicting the skill and knowledge of the Renaissance in many fields: a lute for music, an astrolabe for navigation and astronomy, a globe for exploration.

In the foreground of the picture is a strange grey blur which only comes into proportion and focus when viewed from the side of the painting, when it coalesces into a skull. Holbein seems to be saying, despite the great achievements of the age, all are united in the surety of death to come, a reproof to the vanities of every age, after the author of Ecclesiastes.

But there's one more arresting detail, in the top left corner, which almost completely changes the meaning of the painting. Just visible behind the green curtain is Jesus Christ on the Cross. These men, their achievements and their concerns will pass away, yes; and death is very real, simply an inescapable fact of life; but the Cross offers consolation and even hope.

How can this be? The Cross was originally a Roman imperial torture instrument reserved for political prisoners. To be inspired by the Cross is not to gloss over this but to find hope in the way the Cross can be redeemed, repurposed, re-claimed, as a statement that love is finally stronger than death. This, Christians declare each Easter, is the ultimate truth in the world. We cannot prove this is so – hence, for me, declaring the ultimacy of the Cross is the main Christian leap of faith. Not a declaration of fealty to some metaphysical truth claim, but a resting of one's life on the assumption that the life and ministry of a tortured Palestinian peasant is somehow profoundly revealing about what it means to be human, to lead a good life.

Venerating the Cross is to site meaning in a place of hopelessness. The Cross sets free by declaring that no claim of power or ultimate truth by any empire, ruler, ideology or system of thought overrides the truth manifested in our encounter with the wounded 'other' in our midst.

It's sadly ironic that the Cross has been co-opted and domesticated into the mainstream world view by Christians down the centuries. In an astonishing victory for early capitalism (think double-entry book-keeping), the Cross was eventually understood as some form of debit-credit in which the sins of the world were cancelled through God's payment of his son on account. However, I find older understandings of atonement far more compelling: Abelard's moral example theory of the Cross, yes, but primarily the Christus Victor view going back to the Church Fathers, the Cross representing Christ's triumph over the forces of death and hell. In this reading, venerating the Cross is to declare the powers of the world as bankrupt against the value of those whom they oppress. This would be equally true of an ancient empire such as that which crucified Jesus, or the multinationals that exploit the Global South today.

As a Christian minister, my concern is not to press the Cross into the service of Platonistic truth claims, but to see it as an enduring symbol of hope which gives my life ultimate meaning; and to seek to share this meaning with others. For me, the insight of the Cross is well-summarised in the words of the theologian Herbert McCabe: 'If you don't love, you're dead, and if you do, they'll kill you'. Yes, the Cross *is* tragic and fatalistic, but in that way it is the very opposite of religious escapism, engaging with the reality of life as lived by millions of people whose lives are compromised and oppressed. A Christian faith that cannot speak to them has precisely nothing to say. It is in addressing this reality, and redeeming/transcending it through affirmation of new life, that Christianity attains truth beyond any dogmatic claim to revelatory knowledge of things hidden.



Hans Holbein: *The Ambassadors*. commons.wikimedia.org

One more fascinating detail about *The Ambassadors*: the date on the sundial is set to Good Friday. Perhaps for Holbein, Good Friday is the definitive day of the Church calendar, because its Cross-event reveals something definitive and unique about the nature of life. This would be a profoundly Biblical insight; after all, John's Gospel, the most theologised of the four gospels, does not require an Ascension narrative, but seems to locate the final triumph and vindication of Jesus primarily at his raising up *on the Cross*. In other words, it is precisely on the Cross that the meaning of Jesus's life and teaching is articulated most clearly.

Today, as the degradations of Late Capitalism mock the idea of innate human worth, and environmental despoliation threatens the very

existence of human life, seeing divinity and humanity united on the Cross can offer a therapeutic way of coping with what we see around us. The Cross, whether we're aware of it or not, is always just visible behind the curtain of our pretensions, asking us if we will believe in its wildly-hopeful truth claim that ultimate meaning is found at the point where we declare that divinity is located in the prisoner nailed to the tree. Crucially, on Good Friday, we reclaim the Cross as a symbol of hope for a better future. In doing so, the Cross becomes a manifesto of hope for a better, risen life, not denying but transcending the difficult and painful realities of the world around us.

Chris Griffiths is Team Vicar of Christ Church, East Sheen, London SW 14.