

Gazing at the Passion through the eyes of the Mystics.

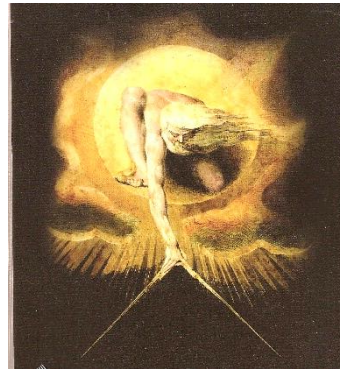
*A moment in time but time was made
through that moment: for without the
meaning there is no time, and that moment
gave the meaning.*

*Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in
the world of light, in the light of the Word, Through the Passion
and Sacrifice, saved in spite of their negative being...*

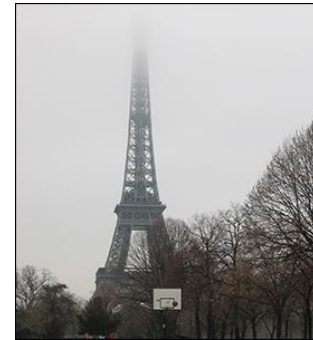
I've used this quote from T.S. Eliot's
poem, Choruses from The Rock, Chapter
Seven, to begin with because he seems
to bring together here the Prologue to St.
John's Gospel, which we read every
Christmas, and which meant so very
much to our Celtic Christian ancestors
and the Passion of Christ.

He's linking the beginning and the end,
the Alpha and the Omega. But something else is happening
also, in his own way he is reminding us that both events, are
out of time moments, so tremendous that as a consequence of
the birth of Christ and the death of Christ, the effects, the
impact of these events will continue unabated down through
the centuries.

I like to think of the Passion, death and Resurrection of Christ
as being a little like the old Signal from Alexandria Palace.



Some of you like me are old enough to remember it, essentially
it was a metal Eiffel type Tower from which rays emanated and
appeared to spread out towards the horizon.



Down through the ages different
generations seem to have tapped into
these experiences. Amongst the
mystics many more have tapped into
the Passion of Jesus, after all it is
written most graphically. And if you are
in love with someone, even though of
course you wish to celebrate their birth
on the whole if they are dragged before a court and unjustly
accused of blasphemy and condemned to a horrific death,
that's what you are going to remember most, and identify with
most.

So I've chosen the writings of three mystics, people who were
each in the different ways, passionately in love with the Risen
Lord, whose lives were either changed or deepened by their
encounter with the Passion of the Lord.

Francis of Assisi' attitude to the Passion can be summed up in
these words.



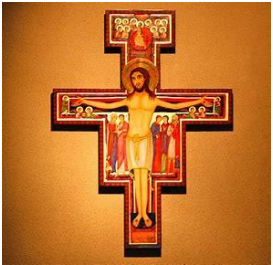
*Keep nothing of yourself for yourself, but give
yourself wholly to Him who has given Himself for
you.*

The whole of His life was his way of trying to
embody this text. He believed that such a huge
price had been paid for us, to save us purely out
of love that the whole of our lives should take the form of
returning that love, in whatever way we are able. The whole of

our lives, notice, there are no half measure with Francis or Clare for that matter.

So at a practical level our habits are made in the shape of a cross, he painted a red Tau cross on the walls of every place he stayed and like the other mystics we shall meet, he was Passionately in love with His Lord.

His conversion if you like, focussed on the Cross at San



Damiano, the little painted cross from which, when he was alone at prayer one day, the voice of Christ seemed to speak to him, requesting him to rebuild His church. At first Francis took this literally, and began to hump stones to rebuild a

local derelict church building, but gradually over the brief span of His life he realised that it was the whole Church of God that required renovation. An insight I believe that still holds good today.

Perhaps that's what the voice of the Crucified Jesus is still trying to say to us today, *Rebuild my church*.

He saw too that if Christ had suffered for him, then he too would accept any suffering that came his way, he encourages those of us who follow his rule, To open our arms to receive whatever each day will bring, and to treat the bad as if it was good, and if people ill treat you to rejoice as if they had offered you the greatest kindness.

Easy to say, not easy to do.

In his meditation on the Lord's Prayer Francis explains what he means by suggesting that the whole of our life should be offered back to God in thanksgiving, he says...

May our knowledge of You become ever clearer that we may know the breadth of your blessings



That we may love You with our whole heart by always thinking of You... With our whole soul by desiring You, with our whole mind by directing all our intentions to You and by seeking

Your glory in everything.....and with our whole strength by spending all our energies and affections of soul and body in the service of Your Love and of nothing else. And may we love our neighbours as ourselves by drawing them all with our whole strength to Your love by rejoicing in the good fortunes of others as well as our own and by sympathizing with the misfortunes of others and giving offense to no one.

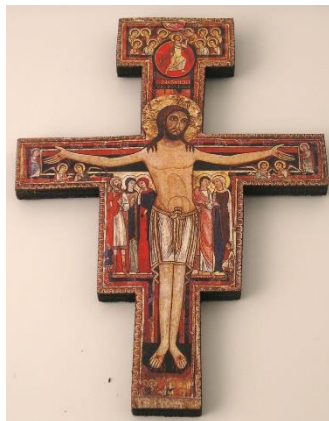
In memory and understanding and reverence of the Love which our Lord Jesus Christ had for us and of those things which He said and did and suffered for us.

He assumes that we too, will be blown away by what Love on the Cross has achieved for us, so that we will seek to give every moment of our lives back to our Risen Lord. It's a kind of tryst of love.

My true love hath my heart and I have His, By just exchange one for the other given; I hold His dear, and mine He cannot miss; there never was a better bargain driven. sums it

up for us in the Poem by Sir Philip Sydney. from his poem ARCADIA.

And he refers to his Lord as mother, hanging on the Cross. Mothering us, offering His life in exchange for ours, as any mother would if her child was in great danger. However, the Cross that meant so much to Francis, at San Damiano, was not one which portrayed His Lord, torn by suffering. Instead Christ stands upon the Cross calmly and with great dignity. He has suffered on the Cross; but it has not destroyed Him. Rather He has accepted all that happened to Him in order to destroy it.



Behind the figure of Christ on the cross, the empty tomb stands out, in a similar manner to the way it is described when the women find it on Easter Morning. On both sides of Jesus arms are 2 angels having a lively discussion by the empty tomb which they point out to us with their hands.

So built into Francis's perception of the Passion was also the Resurrection, and for Him the two could never be separated. This Christ Crucified is glorious, triumphant even carrying another cross as a kind of sceptre of triumph. Above the figure on the cross there is a bright red circle as Jesus ascends into heaven.

So in this particular cross, which was so influential in the life of Francis we have the whole work of our redemption set out...

He was crucified, died and was buried, he descended into hell and on the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father.

Francis was always aware of our human weakness so just below the place where the cross widens there is a cock painted on the right side. Warning us to be careful, don't feel too sure of yourself. Look what happened to Peter. But Jesus friends surround him on either side, the greater the saint the larger the figure.

And Francis' response to the message from this cross was this,

Great and glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me genuine faith, firm hope and perfect Love. Grant me O God true perception and understanding so that I may fulfil your Holy Will.



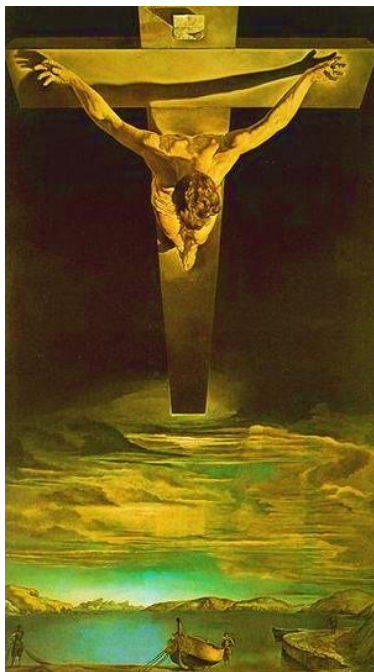
And perhaps as we go into Holy Week this Lent that this could be our prayer also.

For Clare of Assisi, there is an emphasis upon gazing upon the face of Christ if we are to know ourselves, or anything else for that matter. She describes his face as if it is a mirror in which to see our own revealed.

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the Brilliance of Glory! (Heb 1:3) Place your heart in the figure of the Divine substance! And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation!

For Clare the contemplation of God in Christ projects onto the Christian a likeness to the Living God.

She says *'who would not dread the treachery of those who through the arrogance of momentary and deceptive glories attempts to reduce to nothing that which is greater than heaven itself! For the heavens with the rest of Creation cannot contain their creator.'*



She tells us to... *'Look at the surface of the mirror, dwell on the humility. the blessed poverty, the untold labours and burdens which he endured for the redemption of mankind. Then in the depths of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity which led Him to suffer on the wood of the cross and die thereon the most shameful kind of death.'*

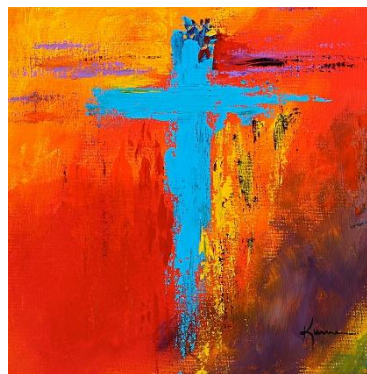
Therefore the mirror, suspended on the wood of the cross urged those who passed by to consider saying, All you who pass by the way, look and see if

there is any suffering like My suffering! Let us answer Him with

one voice and one Spirit as He has said: Remembering this over and over leaves my soul downcast within me. (Lamentations 3:20) From this moment let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervour of Charity.

These passages are passionate and intimate. As Clare holds before us the reason for her vow of Poverty, and the reason for her vow of Celibacy. They are not remotely concerned with self denial, but utterly concerned with a passionate love of the Living God, a way of offering love back to Love itself.

Francis and Clare in their very different ways hold out to us a unique way of contemplating the Passion of Christ. Their love is Passionate, endlessly renewing itself through the study of Scripture, the presence of God in Creation and Prayer.



They use homely images, a painted cross, a mirror, yet these simple things set their minds and their hearts racing. And just like us, they had heard the story year in and year out. Granted Francis dies comparatively young, aged only 44 while Clare lives to be at least 60.

But the way in which they integrate what they read and what they study into prayer and daily life provides us with fresh and I hope creative ways of Gazing at the Passion of Christ this year.

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