

## Drawn into the Heart

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With autumn immersing us in glorious tones of gold-red, and bringing a softening, cooling and shortening of the days, we are being called into a deepening and expanding unfolding of the Paschal Mystery. Again, we are being invited to live into the suffering of the passion, dying, waiting in the tomb and rising anew. There is a wonderful tradition of Medieval illuminations that invite us beyond simply pondering the mystery of crucified risen love, to actually participating in the passion of this loving. In this tradition, the viewer is drawn into the moment where time and eternity embrace, into stillness, into awe and wonder as we see in this example of the *Master of Verucchio* crucifixion. Notice how the illumination has an iconographic quality as the gold background inflames the entire painting with divine light.



In this scene, the illuminator freezes our attention, focuses, and draws us into the moment when "Jesus bows his head and gives up his spirit" (John 19: 30). Gradually, as our gaze goes deeper and becomes a beholding, our awareness sensitizes to the elegant, yet wounded body of Christ hanging from a crudely hewn cross that has been chopped down from a fecund tree. We are reminded that this is the tree of life being crucified. On either side stand a heart-broken Mary and John praying, while two hovering angels weep and infuse a heightened pathos into the scene. Mary Magdalene clothed in blood-red gazes up at her Beloved, while St. Francis wounded with the stigmata adores. The predominance of dark red-brown toning on the onlookers clothing encircles the drooping body of Jesus, drawing our awareness to rest, first on the wounded feet, and then to raise our eyes to the centre of the crucified body. Blood and water flowing from the wound in the side of this Loved One's body then catches our attention and incites our desire to be still, to penetrate deeper, to feel, to weep ourselves. Gently, quietly, delicately in the stillness, we are invited to yield, to release all conceptualizing, and be drawn within, into the heart of all Love. There is the unspeakable grief of heartbreaking sorrow oozing from the painting. At the same time there is a silence, an incomprehensible beauty, a knowing that we participate in this great outpouring of love. We cannot remain casual observers. It is our task now, in this evolutionary moment, to responsively participate in the reciprocal loving exchange of our love, creation's love, the love of the dying Jesus, and divine love, creating a oneing field of suffering being transformed through love into joy.



This classic scene is a conflation of the crucifixion, chapter 19, in the gospel of John, where the gospel writer becomes a master artist creating a vivid scene of the crucifixion that is simultaneously earthy and transcendent. In this Johannine vista, physical, emotional, spiritual, and theological meanings inter-relate, creating language that pulsates with ever self-revealing meaning. Echoing throughout is the hope filled realization that this pouring out of love is a fulfillment of the promise of the scriptures that we will see our salvation. (eg. 19:28; 36). Uniquely, in John, the relationship between Mary the Mother of Jesus and the disciple Jesus loved (traditionally identified with the gospel writer), is heightened (John 19:26-27). Jesus speaks intimately to his mother and John, inviting them to behold and care for each other. In contrast, Mary Magdalene is only briefly mentioned here (John 19:25). Subsequently, what John's crucifixion scene, and the later artists who are influenced by him emphasise, is that a soldier pierces the side of Jesus with a lance, and at once flows out blood and water" (John 19:35). Blood comes to symbolize the divinity of Jesus. Water his humanity. John continues: "The one who saw this has borne witness—this testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—so that you also may believe" (John 19:36). John insists that this portrait is true. He desires that we be touched by this extravagance of love pouring out, until we truly be-lieve, are totally in love, and we too, pour out our hearts in love.

Poignant words, directly quoted from the *Book of Zechariah* (12:10) reverberate: "They will look on Me, the one whom they have pierced." (John 19:37). In the Hebrew text of Zechariah, the All Holy One pouring out grace and entreaty speaks these poignant words. The primitive word chosen for "look on me" וַיִּבְטְחוּ (wə·hib·bî·tū), evokes looking intently with care and compassion, considering or beholding. The one who beholds experiences intense grief and acute sadness for the unwarranted suffering that is occurring. In John's Greek, this emphasis on the affect on the onlooker, is even more magnified, for the Greek, ὀψονται (*opsontai*), is not subject-object looking, but rather a be-holding that brings a deep soul-heart recognition and intimacy in the gaze. We see this subtle meaning in the letter ψ (*Psi*) pointing to soul, heart, psyche emphasising that this is not a "looking on" but soul seeing, seeing with the eye of the heart. The whole of who we are, our life, our soul, our heart are all engaged. In this way of looking, we feel with all our bodily and spiritual senses, until we are moved to participate in, to become one with what is being beheld.

This is the only time John chooses this way of seeing to describe how we are to see the pierced one. Yet, interestingly, ὀψονται (*opsontai*) is the same verb used in the *Book of Revelation* where, the poet from Patmos, describes the river of the water of life clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God. On each side of the river stands the tree of life, where the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (See Revelation 22:1-3). The revelation affirms: "They will see

ὄψονται (*opsontai*) his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever." (Revelation 22:4). In this way of seeing, we truly see the face of the crucified one and in seeing, his name is imprinted on our foreheads. Seeing imprints us with what we see. Thus, in the Johannine crucifixion, when we see the one who is pierced, we are imprinted with the Beloved One's name. And we too are pierced. The veil of our outer identity is pierced and we see who we truly are, one with our wounded Beloved. Moreover, we do not see concretely with natural sunlight. We see with the enlightened eyes of divine love.



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Influenced by years of prayerful meditation on illuminations on the wounded Jesus, there are numerous examples of the quiet intimacy that ensues and transforms the one praying. The most famous example comes from the showings of Julian of Norwich (1342-1420), where she invites her readers to enter into her experience with her as she encounters her crucified Lover. In a pivotal showing, as Julian gazes at her crucified One, who identifies himself as "I", he draws her understanding into his wound, into his vulnerability, into his heart. Julian yields, empties into the hollow, into the emptiness, into ineffable being in one another in the wound, as Christ's looking draws her into his gaze. Her heart-perception is drawn more deeply, until her understanding is one with Christ's understanding. Her understanding arises from within the depths of the heart of Christ. Organically then, just as Julian's Christ draws her within, into a single vibrant luminosity, she invites us, her readers, to behold and see: "a fair and delectable place large enough for all humankind, ... to rest in peace and love."<sup>iii</sup> In the mystical depths of heart understanding, Julian beholds and sees that all humankind are at rest in peace and love, in the heart of Christ. Thus, we see the movement from the bodily sight of the crucified One, to words forming in her understanding, to more and more spiritual sight. In an intense oneing in love, she, and we, become one with Christ, the ground of Love, one with all humankind at rest, one with the luminous presence, who says: "See, how I love you."<sup>iv</sup>



Mechthild of Hackeborn's (1241-1298) revelations, *The Book of Special Grace*, gives us an earlier glistening example of how the scriptures and illuminations of the scriptures, take on a life of their own in prayer. These jottings of Mechthild's experiences in prayer, recorded by Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1301-2) and an anonymous sister, rapidly unfold to give us another vibrant example of how the wound in the side of Christ becomes the locus of transforming union. In a touching heart dialogue Mechthild has with Lady Love, *Minne*, Mechthild asks about the meaning of the suffering of Christ. In response, also referring to John's crucifixion scene, Lady Love says to Mechthild: "whoever thanks him [Jesus] for hanging on the cross pierced by nails, will please him as if he had freed him from the cross and all his pains."<sup>vi</sup> Mechthild, and we as readers, are invited to cultivate a deep and heartfelt gratitude for this pouring out of love, when suddenly the tone changes completely. Almost surprisingly Lady Love announces: "Enter into the joy of your Lord (Matt 25:21)."<sup>vii</sup> Immediately, Mechthild "is rapt into God."<sup>viii</sup> To be rapt is to be completely absorbed into what we are seeing, so much so, that we feel our body is completely taken over. We lose all self-awareness and remain conscious only of God. Drawing on eucharistic imagery that has its source in the blood and water flowing from the wound in Christ's side, Lady Love continues: "Just as a drop of water infused into wine is changed wholly into wine, so the blessed soul passed into God and became one spirit with him (1Cor 6:17). In this union the soul was annihilated in herself."<sup>ix</sup> For Mechthild, this annihilation is exquisite ecstatic union that defies her, by making her one with Christ. In this same way, when we enter into the wound in the side of Christ, we too are drawn into this same annihilation. God strengthens Mechthild, and us, saying: "I will pour into you everything that a human being could ever grasp, and I will multiply my gifts to you as much as it is possible for mortals to bear."<sup>x</sup> We are being invited to truly grasp the meaning of the crucifixion and to bear and give birth to this extravagant love. Finally, Lady Love invites Mechthild: "Rest here in the heart of your Lover.... Rest here in remembrance of your Beloved's gifts."<sup>xi</sup> We can rest now because we are home in the heart of our God.

There is a lyrical passage later in Mechthild's *Liber* that illuminates the nature of the annihilation she seeks to describe that we have tastes of now and comes to fruition when our soul finally is oned fully in God. As we imbibe the felt sense of these words and are absorbed into love, may this be the way we choose to live this Lent and Easter, so that our Beloved can so fill and possess all our senses that the Loved One:

becomes the eye with which the soul sees, the light by which it sees and the beauty that it sees. Thus, in a wonderful and joyful way, God beholds himself, the soul, and all the saints in and with that soul. He is also the ear with which the soul hears his dulcet words — words that caress the soul beyond all material affection, and the soul

hears the harmony of God and all the saints. He is the soul's sense of smell and its breath, breathing into it his own divine life, life-giving breath, which surpasses the fragrance of all perfumes and gives life to the soul forever. And he is the soul's sense of taste by which it savours its own sweetness within itself. God is also the voice of the soul, and the tongue in which he fully and highly praises himself and for that soul. He is its heart delighting the soul and making it glad, enjoying his own delights in and with the soul in the most delicious pleasure. Finally, God is the soul's very life and the movement of all its limbs: everything the soul does, God himself does within it. In this way that verse is truly fulfilled in the saints: "God shall be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).<sup>xii</sup>

The crucified One is our eyes, our ears, our smell, our breath, our taste, our heart, our body drawing us into the fullness of resurrected life in the Trinity of Love as suffering in love becomes joy.

Thus, this Lent and Holy Week, when "we", as an intentional *Contemplative Evolution Network*, meet each afternoon in communion in the field of love oneing us, may we not simply "look on" the wounded One, the One who is pierced, but be drawn into the heart of our Crucified God. As we feel our spiritual senses sensitizing, we can see the world as our Beloved sees, listen to the cries of those suffering as our Beloved listens, smell the fragrance of our Beloved's aroma, breath with Spirit breath, and taste the hidden sweetness of life. We can delight in being one with the crucified and risen Christ, pour out our hearts and speak confidently in love.



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- i [Crucifixion](#), The Master of Verucchio, Rimini, Italy, c. 1320. Fitzwilliam Museum.
  - ii [Crucifixion](#), *The Potocki Psalter*, Paris c. mid - 13<sup>th</sup> century, Boston, *Museum of Fine Arts*.
  - iii Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, *Showing*: 10.24.
  - iv *Showing*: 10.24.
  - v [Crucifixion](#), German, c.1325-1350, Linen warp, wool and silk embroidery, MET, New York.
  - vi Mechthild of Hackeborn, *The Book of Special Grace*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2017), 2.17.
  - vii [Ghostly Grace](#), 2.17.
  - viii [Ghostly Grace](#), 2.17.
  - ix [Ghostly Grace](#), 2.17.
  - x [Ghostly Grace](#), 2.17.
  - xi [Ghostly Grace](#), 2.17.
  - xii [Ghostly Grace](#), 5.21.
  - xiii [The Trinity \(Throne of Grace\)](#), Dirc van Delft, *Book of Hours*, 1400-1404.