

God in the Gallery: Christchurch Cathedral, Sunday 21 March 2010
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There used to be a programme on BBC radio called 'The Tingle Factor'.

I don't know whether it's still running, but it was based around the simple format of a presenter chatting with a famous person, and building the conversation around a piece of music which had, for the guest, the effect of sending a shiver or tingle down their spine whenever they heard it. The programme tried to discover why this music was so significant for the 'celebrity', and what it was that gave it the 'tingle factor'.

I might use similar language to describe the sensation I had when I first saw the painting we are reflecting on this evening, 'Christ before the High Priest' by the early 17th-century Dutch artist, Gerrit van Honthorst. I can recall even now, some thirty years on, ambling nonchalantly through the National Gallery in London, taking for granted far too many of its countless masterpieces, and being suddenly stopped in my tracks by this magnificent image.

Partly my eye was caught by the effect the artist achieves through the candle on the table – and the use of artificial light in this way, I have since discovered, is a not unusual feature of work by artists of the period inspired, as van Honthorst was, by the Italian master, Caravaggio.

Partly, too, I was drawn in by the sheer energy of the scene the painting depicts, the confrontation between two men, one of whom has the power to condemn the other to death by virtue of the authority conferred on him by the book before which he sits.

And the sheer *size* of the canvas was another factor – in its original, this work is nearly 3 metres high by 2 metres across.

But above all I was transfixed – as I still am now, every time I look at it – by the expression on the face of our Lord. Van Honthorst, it seems to me, whatever we may say about the ‘European’ character of his figures, evokes with enormous skill and power and sensitivity the attitude he imagines Christ adopting toward the grotesque charade into which he has unlawfully and unwittingly been dragged.

Now, I’m not going to give you a learned discourse on this magnificent work as a piece of art: that reference just now to Caravaggio was entirely gratuitous, and I make no pretence to being an art critic or art historian. When it comes to old masters I’m afraid I rather share the philosophy of the medieval Pope depicted by John Cleese in that Monty Python sketch who, after taking Michelangelo to task for a far from satisfactory depiction of the Last Supper, admits, ‘I may not know much about art, but I know what I like.’ But I will try to offer you one or two thoughts on it along the lines of a theological reflection.

The moment van Honthorst is capturing, we may recall, occurs during the first of our Lord’s so-called ‘trials’ in the lead-up to his crucifixion, the one, apparently at night, before the high priest, Caiaphas. Matthew describes the extraordinary scene for us in our reading, and while he is hardly an unbiased reporter, he wants to highlight for us several of its key features: the difficulty that the accusers of Jesus have in finding people to testify against him; the accusation that is made against him when two witnesses are eventually found; the challenge to Jesus to answer the charge, made by a high priest who appears already to have reached his

verdict; and the response of the accused, a combination of the cryptic and the silent, which inflames the scene still further. If I had a text this evening it would be verse 63: 'But Jesus was silent'. I suggest you can feel the electricity of this silence in this painting. But it is not just *any* silence – the silence of, say, the forgetful, or the shy, or the reticent, or the tongue-tied, or the overwhelmed or the speech-impaired.

It is not even, I believe, the 'passive' silence of resignation, as Margaret Wily suggests in her poem inspired by this painting:

...the patient head inclines, calm, folded hands
mutely accepting life's fast-dwindling space
and lonely destiny of thorns.

Rather it's the highly 'active' silence of dissent, of dismissal, of disdain – of I would say *righteous* disdain. It's a silence that actually speaks volumes, and what it says is, I have such contempt for these proceedings that I will not appear to give them even the slightest shred of legitimacy by engaging with you, answering your questions, playing by your rules. It is the silence born of a palpable refusal to accept the very basis upon which the trial is constituted. As used by Jesus at this moment it is the ultimate expression of disrespect, of refusal not only to play the game according to another's rules but even to accept the legitimacy of those rules.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' follow-up hearing before Pilate, in chapter 27, he records Jesus again refusing to respond to his accuser, 'not even to a single charge', and the Roman governor being 'greatly amazed' at this silence in the face of so many accusations. On one level we might say that Pilate's amazement – just like the frustration of Caiaphas in our narrative – is justified, for was not Jesus on trial precisely for *not* having kept silent in the

past, for having opened his mouth rather too often? Surely *now* he could say something to try to defend himself, to try to save his life? But to these religious and political leaders he has nothing to say: in the face of such godless, self-serving corruption and hypocrisy he chooses to make only one response, whatever the cost – silence.

It seems to me that his silence at this point is all of a piece with his witness and teaching as we have it recorded in the gospels.

Do not the gospel writers want to tell us that his whole mission was informed by a rejection of the devilish temptation to play the power games so much enjoyed by the rulers of this world?

Do they not want to tell us that his message primarily consisted of a call to live according to a radically different ethic from that promoted by the leaders of his day, an ethic based on service and meekness and reconciliation and love, rather than greed and self-aggrandizement and lust and control?

Do they not record his saying that one cannot serve both God and mammon, and demonstrating in his own life what radical opposites those two masters were?

And do they not suggest that, at the heart of his message, was a call to seek first a kingdom which, in terms of its values and priorities, was not of this world?

In the context depicted by van Honthorst, silence may well be the only appropriate response; and others have adopted it since when confronted by situations whose legitimacy they refuse to recognize. Used aright it can be the ultimate tool of dissent and rebellion.

But, as Jesus himself showed, confronting injustice and iniquity may at other times require different means, including – to use that well-known Quaker expression – ‘speaking truth to power’. The Jesus who remains silent in the face of his accusers is also the one who can employ his most powerful invective against those who use – or misuse – their power to oppress others.

But whether we use silence or speech, the point is to recognize injustice and iniquity and be prepared to resist it. And van Honthorst’s painting, it seems to me, captures perfectly that sense of the two grounds upon which it is possible to stand, the clash of two worlds in radical opposition to one another.

And the challenge for us, who might perhaps want to identify with the shadowy figures in the background of the painting, is not to withdraw from the one world into the other, but to seek to bring the values of the one to bear on the other – to find ways to live, as both a church and individual followers of ‘the Way’ – that promote trust in the place of fear, gratitude in the place of greed, hospitality in the place of prejudice, hope in the place of despair, life in the place of death.

...because the silence van Honthorst depicts is not the silence of abandonment or resignation but of confrontation and challenge – a confrontation and challenge that continues through the rest of the story, which we know so well and will commemorate again very soon, to find its ultimate expression in a willingness, not to preserve one’s life at all costs, but to lay it down so that others might live.

In this magnificent and inspired work of art van Honthorst gives us a confrontation between two distinct and opposed discourses of power, and no room for doubt as to which ultimately prevails.