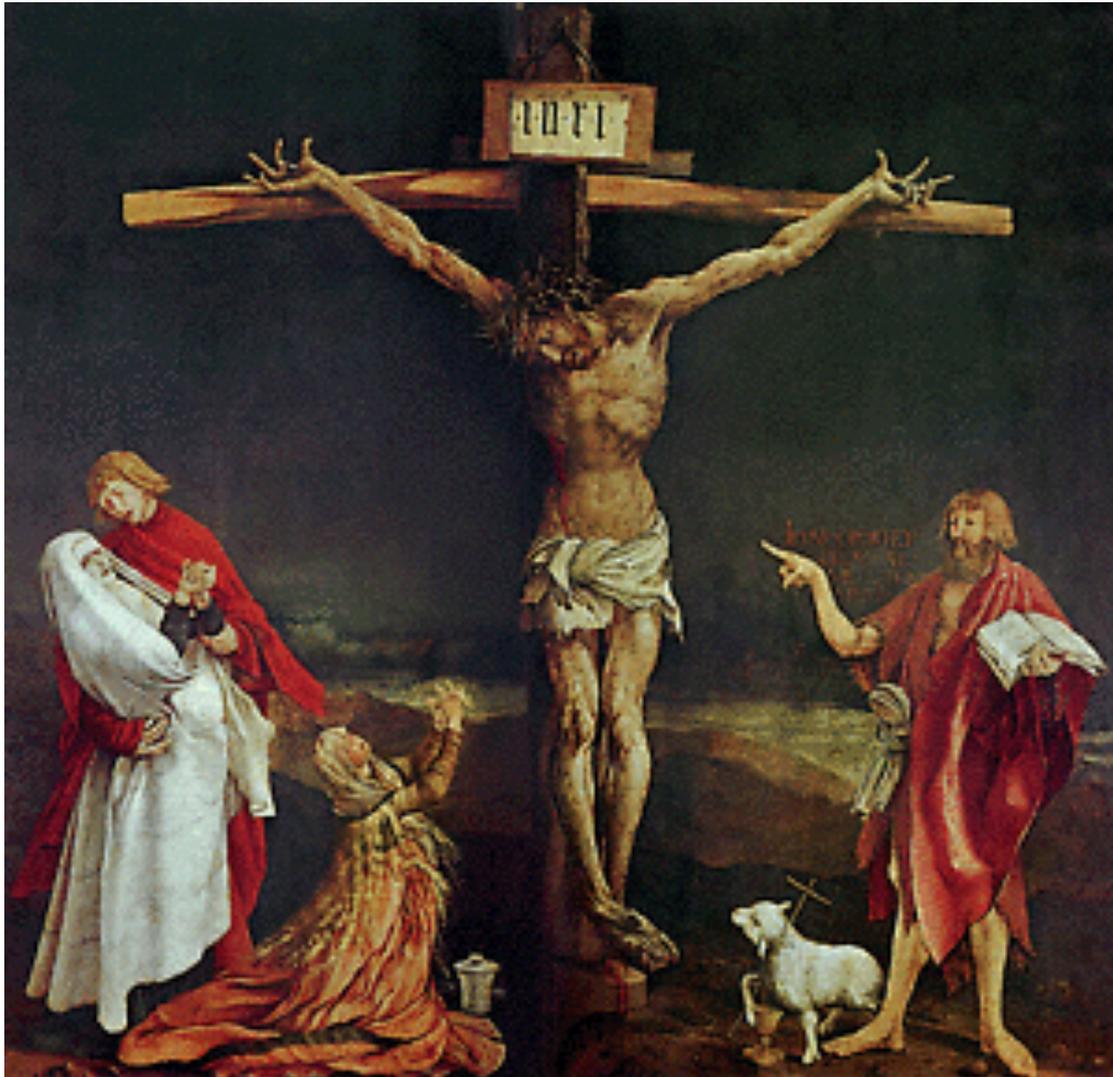


Good Friday reflection by Andrew McCully



THE ISENHEIM ALTERPIECE

One of the many things that I love about so much Christian art is that it so often shares universal significance with a focus on a specific place and specific worshipers. The mysterious German painter Grunewald, painted this extraordinary crucifixion as part of a large and folding altarpiece for the Anthonine canons of Isenheim in Alsace. The altarpiece, broken up when religious orders were suppressed during the French Revolution, is now in a beautiful museum in Colmar, near Strasbourg, which Nicholas and I visited a couple of years ago.

The Anthonines sheltered pilgrims and nursed lepers and victims of plague; but above all they specialized, as they did in their hospital at Isenheim, in the treatment of St Anthony's Fire. This was the name given to the dreadful

condition caused (as we now know, but was not understood at the time) by the ergot fungus which attacks rye. In times of famine, mouldy rye would be milled into flour along with the healthy grain, contaminating the bread eaten by poor people. The result was epidemics in Northern Europe, in which the skin of those affected itched and burned, then turned black and gangrenous. The bishop of Lincoln's chaplain, passing through the region in 1200 has this terrifying description of sufferers: "Their flesh was partly burnt, the bones charred and certain limbs had fallen off and, despite these mutilations, their half-preserved bodies appeared to be in rude health." All this was naturally accompanied by excruciating pain and frequently by hallucinations caused by the fungus.

The regime in Anthonine hospitals involved tending to the sick including rudimentary surgery on the gangrenous limbs. At the time of the making of the Isenheim Altarpiece a surgeon working with the Anthonites claims to have carried out "100-200 amputations at the hospital of St Anthony in Strasbourg and elsewhere".

But the patients were also comforted and consoled through prayer. They were led into the church to the altar to help them come to terms with their suffering and prepare themselves for death. Gazing up at the painting they would have heard the same words from Isaiah that Roxane read to us: "A man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity.... Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted."

The altarpiece is complex and it's difficult to describe without a visit. It's painted on both sides with hinged panels that reveal different scenes when shut, partially open or fully open. Hinged shutters also show scenes from the life of St Anthony, including his demonic visitations in which on the distended body of one of his tormenting demons you can see the symptoms of St Anthony's Fire. When fully open, as it would be on feast days, the altarpiece shows on either side the Annunciation of Virgin and a radiant Resurrection of Christ. But closed, the sufferers and pilgrims in the hospital would have seen this desperately harrowing crucifixion.

In so many other crucifixion paintings Christ is a figure of classical beauty. But this is very different. Grunewald's Christ, a dead body after a horrific execution. On the cross Christ's hands have been pierced by nails so huge that they protrude from the wood. Christ bears hundreds of marks of prolonged torture; the wounds are red, his skin a ghastly grey/green. His hands are splayed in agony. Thorns are embedded in his cruelly scourged flesh. His loincloth has been torn in the violence. Christ's feet twist with blackened toes around a single nail, his blood still flowing down onto the cross. Christ's face is not that of a God, but has the closed eyes, the half open mouth and blue lips of a dead man.

There are lots of other messages from the iconography of this painting: from the distress of Christ's mother comforted by St John; from the weeping Mary Magdalene; from St John the Baptist; and from the slaughtered lamb in the

foreground.

But our eyes, and the eyes of the sufferers at the Anthonine hospital are focused most of all on Grunewald's Christ, which dominates against the grim, black background. It's a horrific image. But it is horror with a purpose – to teach us the meaning of the Crucifixion. He suffers so much, because he loves us so much. The appalling wounds shown by the painting and the pain which Christ endures has to be great enough to redeem the sins of the whole world. But there is also consolation. In the hospital the patients, while suffering horribly from St Anthony's Fire, reflect on Christ experiencing even greater pain, even unto death. The suffering is shared. Christ is not isolated from the sufferers but draws them, draws us, together in his love. That is surely why patients were brought in front of Grunewald's altar, as part of their treatment and their worship. They, and we, reflect on the words of Isaiah: "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."