

Holy Week
St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow
Good Friday – Holy Saturday, 10th – 11th April 2020
Dr. Deborah Lewer on Rogier van der Weyden's *Pietà*
***(Lamentation)*, after 1441,**
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

LAMENTATION

1

Welcome to the second of three podcasts for Holy Week from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow. My name's Debbie Lewer. I'm an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's.

As we come to the end of Good Friday and approach the night, I want to take a look at a very poignant work of art. It is a small panel, exquisitely crafted by the fifteenth-century Netherlandish artist who knew most about painting with great naturalism and deep emotion. It is a Lamentation.

The scene is at the foot of the cross. Wedged hard in the arid earth, the dark form seems to divide the heavens. This is Golgotha. Its name means The Place of the Skull. People come here to condemn, to gawp and to mock. But, what the artist paints and foregrounds, with such care, is something wholly other. It's lament, it's leave-taking and it's love.

2

The scene is not described in the scriptures. But for centuries, it's held a deeply important place in the devotional life of generations of people. Christ's lifeless body has been brought down from the cross. With great economy, the artist shows just three mourners in this intimate lamentation. Dressed in deep scarlet, is John, young, and

beardless, known by tradition as 'the disciple Jesus loved.' His face is raw, and red from weeping. He sinks to his knees as he bears the weight of the body and of Mary, the mother. At the wounded feet, is Mary Magdalene, with her long hair unbound, her tears falling and her traditional jar of ointment. The broken body is slender, almost naked, the arms recently strained. The skin's pallor is deathly. The wounds are bloodied. A congealing trickle of red has seeped through and under the loincloth. This body of pain is shown to us held, tenderly, embraced. John's hand, and Mary's hand meet at the very site of the deepest wound.

3

Rogier van der Weyden was a pioneer of the extraordinary naturalism for which Netherlandish painting of this period is known. How does the artist combine the ordinary detail and the extraordinary significance of this scene? Look at the light, for example. There is a warm, intense glow on the horizon. The sun is setting. It tells us something of ordinary life at that time: because Jewish law required bodies to be buried before sundown. It must all be done before the Sabbath starts. There isn't much time. The fading light tells us that the moment of parting, is very close. But we are also on the cusp of a new time. The evening light is also like a great halo over the scene, over the earth, a benediction. It's almost like a rainbow.

And look at the lavish expanses of cloth here. The shimmering richness of Mary's royal blue against which this broken body is set is of the most costly pigments, reserved, by tradition, only for her. Late medieval artists also understood the parallel between the mother's robes, swaddling clothes and grave clothes. Mary kisses her son, and cradles him in a way that evokes the images we all know, of the young Madonna and the infant she swaddled. Mary Magdalen's life is there too. Traditionally, she was the unnamed woman who once anointed, wept tears upon and kissed the feet of Christ when he was living. She will carry a jar of precious spices again, to the tomb, after the Sabbath. And this artist places that jar directly above the

symbolic skull. It reminds us of the connection between anointing and death. And with a tradition this painter knew, the skull of this hill, also symbolizes a lineage all the way back to Adam, the first human. The relationships between these figures, and with our own lives and mortality, are all parts of the painting's great eloquence.

4

How might this little panel speak to us today? Perhaps now, at this time of pandemic, when we cannot embrace those we love, when we fear our own and others' mortality, it's worth looking at something else that is happening here. There is a new relationship, that comes out of this death. On the cross, Jesus looked down and gave John his disciple and Mary his mother to one another. Out of their shared suffering and their new solidarity, came new life. In grief shared.