By Joynel Fernandes –

‘It was now about the sixth hour and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun light failed and the curtain of the temple was torn into two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this He breathed his last.’ (Luke 23:46)

After the agonising and terrorising death of Christ on the cross, His stretched and skewered body was taken down and laid on a slab. His Mother Mary and his disciples gathered in deep sorrow around His dead body. All was now over. The feast of the Passover was at hand and the Lamb had been slain. With deep affection they lament, embalm, shroud and lay the body of Jesus into the tomb.

The pathos of this haunting moment has been powerfully captured by Andrea Mantegna through his visually vigorous painting, ‘The Lamentation over the Dead Christ’ (1475 – 1501). The work is extra-ordinary thanks to its iconography and technical genius.

We are at once drawn through a window-like frame into a tiny, claustrophobic room. A dead figure permeates the space of the panel. Christ has not yet triumphed over death. The bells of heavenly glory have not yet rung. Here, Christ is human and he is dead. He is placed on a cold slab of a morgue or the stone of unction. He appears bloodless and monochromatic. The dullness of the space enhances the paleness of His skin and the darkness of the hour.

The Catholic Church believes in Christ as fully God and fully man. Without the essence of
Christ humanity, the death on the cross would have lost its significance and so would the power of His Resurrection. Andrea Mantegna, along with several other artists adopts the beauty of this theology and transforms it into a striking image. ‘The Lamentation over the Dead Christ’ presents the absolute physicality of death and the end of a mortal being.

The lumbering corpse of Jesus. It appears swollen and heavy. This manifestation is the result of extreme perspectives that Mantegna employs and experiments with in most of his paintings. He uses foreshortening to create an illusion of space and an illusion of depth. The interaction between the stream of vertical lines (Christ body, hands, feet, edge of the table) and horizontal ones (pillow, shroud) further augments the stillness and the stiffness of the image.

The foreshortening although exaggerated and revolutionary is not perfect with regards to perspective. It is distorted and deliberate. Mantegna plays too fast and too far. If one were to lie down in front of the mirror, in true perspective, the feet would obscure the face and it would be larger and closer to the viewer. Mantegna toys our peripheral vision and draws us higher, building upon the body of Christ, towards an emotionally resonant rib-cage and thorax, up onwards towards His suffering face.

Take a closer look at the rendering of the face. Wrinkled, it is lined with weariness and framed by wavy curls. Christ frowns as if in pain at the sight and sound of grief. A mortal prisoner to his icy bed, he desires to wake up and wipe his follower’s tears. The gravity of His death commits to the profoundness of a new life.

Christ head rests on a pillow like object that lifts his face higher. It makes it more visible to the viewer. The watery stain on the cushion merges with the pinkish grey granulations of the
Picturing the Passion: ‘The Lamentation Over the Dead’ by Andrea Mantegna

stone berth and the lividness of the lifeless body. The nails that pierce his skin create life-like wounds. Observe the holes on His hands and feet. Clinically accurate, the dry skin tears like parchment with sharp edges. The dramatically drawn drapery contributes to the tragedy.

Yet another significant feature of this painting is its endowment to naturalism. The Saviour is depicted not as a pristine being but as a commoner, despised and rejected with no beauty worth desiring. Look at his rugged peasant like face. Nay he ain’t a handsome hero. His hands and feet are crouched and bent. Notice his mother Mary. She is no longer depicted as Michelangelo’s young maiden fainting or pondering. Rather her face is wrinkled with age and pockmarked by time. Broken, she laments by her dead Son. Tears stream down her elderly face. Right next to the Virgin, one can decipher the profile of a sorrowful John the Evangelist. With mouth agape, hands joined, he bewails for no longer can he hear his Master’s heart beat.

It is speculated that Mantegna painted this image for his personal devotion and kept it with him as a funerary monument. It never belonged to a patron. Theories suggest that perhaps it was rejected by the patron because of the intense focus on the dead foreshortened Christ. Whatever the case may be, one can definitely surmise that the artist held this painting very dear to his heart.

What is certainly extra-ordinary about this painting is its technical beauty. It brings us closer to the body of Christ. We are at the tomb at this moment and we join the other two mourners
in meditating on His suffering and death. Or are they three?

Notice intently the third visage to the right of the Virgin. Undoubtedly it signifies the presence of Mary of Magdala. The metal jar of ointment silhouetted against the empty corner affirms this assumption. It recalls her unconditional service in washing the feet of her Master with ‘costly perfume made from pure nard that filled the house with fragrance.’ The fragrant love hunts away the stench of death and invites us to imitate her likeness in sitting at the feet of Jesus in gratitude and adoration of His sacrifice that won us salvation!

Joynel Fernandes is the Assistant Director of the Archdiocesan Heritage Museum, Mumbai. She is currently pursuing her Masters in History. Researching on Church History and Church art is her passion. She hopes to make its understanding more approachable to the younger generation.

The museum is open from Tuesday to Sunday between 9am to 5pm. For a guided tour please contact: 022 – 29271557

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