

Last Words-by George Isherwood

The Mehrheimer Triptych is a world famous example of late gothic painting. With a new realism, the unknown artist has painted his Savior crowned with thorns hanging in a rough agony on a splintered cross. The late art Professor Udo Hartmann of Kassel was the first to point out the exaggerated extension of the Messiah's neck... A new sort of hyper-realism, heretofore unknown in German Art of the Reformation. It appears in his last moments of agony on the cross, Jesus is speaking to his own underarm.

Even the good professor himself never discovered the historical reason Jesus' strange, un-anatomical posture. When the painting was restored in the 1980s by a team of Dutch experts under the direction of Martje Zeldenhurst, The dark shadows under the crucified savior's right arm revealed a strange surprise. As she passed her brush carefully on the dark shadows under the suffering Christ's right arm, two fiery red dots appeared in the darkness. Under the Savior's divine armpit was a spider!

The Romans who had built bridges over the Rhine and hung sun awnings across the Colosseum, knew it was far easier to lift a criminal than a heavy cross with a criminal nailed to it. Indeed there was always a cross to carry thru the crowded streets, which was returned to the Praetorium after every execution. Every Roman provincial capital had a forest of crosses permanently mounted at the entrance to the city. It was commonly know as "the last wilderness". The Romans knew it was easier to lift a criminal with ropes to a mounted cross and then nail his hands and feet to it.

Like so many historical events described a century after the event, the Gospel writers got many details wrong as right. The Jerusalem Jews were never asked to vote on whom the occupying army would kill next, especially not in troubled provincial capital. The sky over Jerusalem never turned black. The holy cloths of the Temple were indeed ripped apart, but by rampaging Roman soldiers thirty some years alter.

The Romans graciously did allow their local puppet king, Herod Antipas to have a placard placed over the head of Jesus of Nazareth saying , "Here is Jesus, the man who claims he is the King of the Jews. Look on his Kingdom of Crosses and weep"

Jesus and two thieves were executed in late March after the Passover.

Under the cross beam of Jesus' cross, there lived a fat black spider with bright red eyes named Corbulo. In the summer killing season, he had always fed quite well on the fat horse flies that come from all over the Holy Land to lick the wounds of the executed criminals. His web was so full from the summer, that he he could survive all through the winter.

In winter pickings were slimmer, less flies feeding a few Zealots, the occasional tax dodger, or pick pocket or two who worked The Great Temple of Herod, but Corbulo was getting by. He was sleeping quietly in his web in the cool shadows of his crossbeam, dreaming of a lovely Syrian butterfly he had once devoured, when he was rudely awoken by the pounding of nails and screams. Now Corbulo was a rather reticent arachnid, but he felt compelled to say something

to the criminal hanging just in front of him.

"Pardon, but could you please keep your moaning down to a minimum. I am trying to get some rest. If you criminals keep on screaming like that, you will scare all the flies away!"

Now since Jesus was of the line of David and David's son was the great Solomon, who was wise enough to understand the language of all God's creatures, he also understood the language of spiders which was vaguely similar to Aramaic, and the Nazarine replied, ..

"But I am no criminal"

"That's what they all say," Corbulo replied.

"But no verily, I am innocent," said the Saviour.

"Yeah, yeah, " replied Corbulo." Do you think you are the first man to get nailed up here? My grand mother said in Pompey's time there were thousands of crosses. Every one of them hung thought he was an innocent man...lots of fat horse lies. Gran said some were black with them"

"But I am the Son of God, Jesus, the Messiah, and it is written that I must die for the salvation of all men."

"How is your dying up here going to bring salvation to all men?" asked the spider curiously. Corbulo thought the extreme pain had pushed the poor "two legger" over the edge.

"I don't know myself, but one day Greek theologians will explain how it all works. It's hard enough just to die up here, but I know I am dying here to make men free"

'Why would you want to go and do a thing like that for?' asked Corbulo.

"Because it is written the Messiah will bring salvation to all people." Jesus then let out a blood curdling moan, which the good mannered spider tried to ignore.

" I am the Way, the Light, I bring salvation, even to the Gentiles," said Jesus swallowing his agony.

" Spiders too?"

"My gift is for all that live"

Even those Roman bastards that did this to you?"

"Yes, even to the Romans. They are just following orders. They know not what they are doing."

"Sure they do, replied the spider.

I give to all who believe the free gift of Salvation."

And the Saviour smiled as he cried.

"Salvation?"

"Yes"

"For free?" asked the spider.

And Jesus answered, "It is a free gift from God to every one who believes." He started to bleed heavily. He could feel blood trickling down over his toes.

"Free? But no one values something he hasn't paid for. Even the littlest gnat I eat last, must pay me for the honor of eating him with screams and wailing."

" I give this free to all who believe in me"

"Even the Greeks, who believed in Democracy and carved marble statues, didn't give away things for free!"

"Oh Lord, make it end quickly!" an old lady standing by wept and then fell back into the arms of a disciple that Jesus loved.

Jesus heard his mother crying below him. John was holding her up. She was shaking her head. Mary didn't notice the spider. Her eyes were never that good. " Now he is even talking to himself. When will it end, John?"

"But a free gift lacks value," Corbulo said after giving the matter some thought. "Like the free sugared dates they give out in the Hippodrome on Tiberius' birthday. Half of them are thrown at the losers"

" Oh, you of little faith, one day you shall with less legs divide my Kingdom"

" I beg your pardon, there's no need to be rude and curse me ! I'm not the guy who nailed you to this cross. I was just trying to make pleasant conversation. The say misery likes company."

"You of little faith..."

The poor spider didn't understand this at all, but perhaps the young rabbi was suffering from delirium. It often happened after a few hour up here...blood loss..infection..fever..lack of oxygen from the tightening chest muscles.

"You get a great view of Herod's Temple from up here," said Corbulo, trying to change the topic of conversation. The man on the cross whimpered in agony.

Corbulo kept talking with Jesus until the Messiah said at last, " It is finished"

The Romans speared the dead Nazarine and flies landed on the wound in abundance.

" Time for dinner! It's a great day to be a spider!"

The fat black spider was rather happy his cross was chosen for the Crucifixion as he retreated into the dark shadows of his crossbeam chewing on a crispy

Nabatean fly wing.

The spider never understood what Jesus had told him, until he was reborn in the Vatican as a pope in the early 16th century. He was called the red pope, because his eyes were always bloodshot and was more than shocked when he looked down and found six of his legs missing. Two feet in gold embroidered slippers. He started to laugh at himself as he had never really believed in reincarnation.

His papal castratos noticed His Holiness often lifting his skirts and looking down at his legs and turning wildly as if he had lost something, as indeed, he had.

"Maybe His Holiness has dropped his rosary beads," said a Swiss guard.

"No, just counting my legs, boy!" he thought to himself as he invited the fair Swiss soldier to guard his bedroom.

The Swiss guard shook his head.

Corbulo found life as a spider much much simpler than that of a pope, no Bohemian heretics, no sly theologians or angry bishops, and no Florentine bankers. A spider web was much more manageable than Western Christendom and far easier to defend, although the music in the Vatican was often exquisite and exquisite dinners with the pasta 'farfala' reminded him of eating butterflies.

Corbulo changed his name to "Innocent", which he thought was a wryly funny name for a soul that had once been a spider. And the faithful bowed down to him like trembling fire-flies, which seemed to him only right. Every night the Syrian butterfly fluttered through his dream, but he could never understand why.

As Innocent the XV, tried to be a good pope, read his Cicero, polished up his Latin, build new churches and decorate ceilings, but old age descended on him too quickly and even more quickly Pope Innocent ran out of money. "May God send those Florentine bankers to the deepest bolgia in Hell!"

"The Holy Father is on his last spindly legs," the Venetian ambassador wrote home.

The aged pope was riddled with gout and tertiary syphilis, unable to lift his head for more than a few minutes and barely able to keep his red eyes open.

"Here, drink this, Your Holiness, it is from my homeland," said Cardinal Borgia pouring him out a glass of white Moscato wine, whose sweetness seemed to hide some other bitter taste. The old pope never really liked Borgia who was swarthy and always seemed to be smiling, a smiling raisin, that greasy, slimy Borgia would push his own grandmother down the steps for a few pieces of silver. Borgia had come from Spain and the Spanish were not to be trusted. They were worse than Venetians. The Cardinal was even rumored to have two sons and a daughter. Not to be trusted.

The Spanish Cardinal had urged this last audience on him. He was to meet Jacob Fugger the Rich. Innocent intensely detested the greedy German, even

more than he hated Borgia, but the Vatican was nearly bankrupt and a new sale of indulgences could perhaps save the Holy Roman Church from insolvency. Some painters and prostitutes needed to be paid...the new bridge over the Tiber...the new roof for the Maria Maggiore. Rain drops were falling on devout heads.

Fugger was the head of Europe's biggest banking house. His bank transferred funds for the Vatican and sometimes lent the Holy Fathers money at very high rates. Pope Innocent had been putting off the German banker for years. Now here he was in the Vatican demanding repayment, at the end of the afternoon when the Holy Father would preferred to have napped.

The pope he greeted the Fugger crumpled in a golden chair like a pale branch of driftwood, while outside his porphyry audience chamber, a boy's choir was singing. The pope regretted that it would take longer to pay off his last loan than he first thought. There had been a bad harvest in the Emilia-Romagna and the plague had returned to southern Italy.

The Fugger replied, "I also have debts to pay and can't satisfy my Florentine creditors with words, even words so elegant as your own, Holy Father, but perhaps, if His Holiness would sponsor a new sale of indulgences, I might be more well disposed to wait for my money. The German brothers will pay through the nose to free their poor sinning relatives burning in purgatory. Each coin they spent on an indulgence meant a decade less for fiery punishment. If you let me organize the sale for you, I would be even willing to reduce the interest on Your Holiness' last loan down to 12%"

"12% ! Blessed Mary, Mother of God!" The Pope reminded the Fugger that as a Christian, and especially as Pontifex Maximus, he could never pay interest on a loan. It just wasn't biblical!

"But certainly, Your Holiness can determine what is Biblical or not," the wily German returned.

"If you were in the goodness of your Catholic heart willing to reduce the interest on my loan you could, perhaps, take up to 40% of the total profits of the indulgence sale in all the German lands north of the Alps.

"Austria included?" The Fugger's eyes lit up.

"Yes, also Austria and Tyrol," the withered pope replied. He was too old to barter. 60% / 40% was the best deal he could get.

"Ahh," smiled the Fugger, "then!"

The pope added, "Of course, theologically speaking, Christian salvation cannot be bought or sold."

"Of course not, your Holiness," the Fugger replied, " But then no one values something that he hasn't paid for, does he?"

The pope had heard that phrase before. Hadn't he once said the same himself? But where? Then something like a lead ball rolled from back to front upside down, across the cerebral dome the pope's brain, as if held rolling

across the ceiling of his skull against all the laws of gravity by some hovering unremembered magnet . It was as if a thought like a fat spider that had silently, stealthily crawled from the back of his mind, over the cupola of his skull and swiftly down to the front of his forehead. The weight of which caused the old pope's head to drop forward. It was the last thought the old man had and the last time he was seen to move.

The Fugger took this last dropping of the Pontiff's head as a nod, as a sign of assent and left the audience room swiftly.

The wine caused the pope to close his heavy pink eyelids. He was sure he had heard that phrase before. "No one values what hasn't paid for." Of course! I, Corbulo myself said it to Jesus himself when I was a spider! But that was back in 33 AD and now he was a paralyzed pope. Innocent tried one last time open his eyes and to count his legs." But if he had been a spider how did he ever get to be a pope and where in God's name were his other legs? " It was all so terribly confusing!"

Sharp pains, like knitting needles pierced his belly and ended the pope's metaphysical speculations. He tried to call out, but his tongue no longer moved. Pope Innocent defecated and died.

I outside the audience room, old Fugger was slapping his thighs with joy. "Schwein gehabt! His Holiness has agreed to the indulgences! The whole German North! The sale can begin in a month!" the Fugger exclaimed as he turned to Borgia at the doorway. "Gracias, your Excellency, I will always be in your debt."

"And may I never be in yours, Senor Fugger," replied the grinning Cardinal.

"If you ever need credit. My house is at your service" The German bowed deeply, kissed Borgia's hand and rushed out laughing.

Cardinal Alexander Borgia entered the audience room smiling, but quickly feigned surprise as he found Innocent the XV very still and very dead with his head bowed down still seated in his golden chair with spittle dripping down on his golden slippers. The cardinal closed the dead pope's eyelids. The horrible stink was a reminder of even a pope's mortality. In the Sistine Chapel a choir sang. Borgia prayed for the pope's successor which he knew to be himself .

BY GEORGE ISHERWOOD, AMSTERDAM , August, 2012

