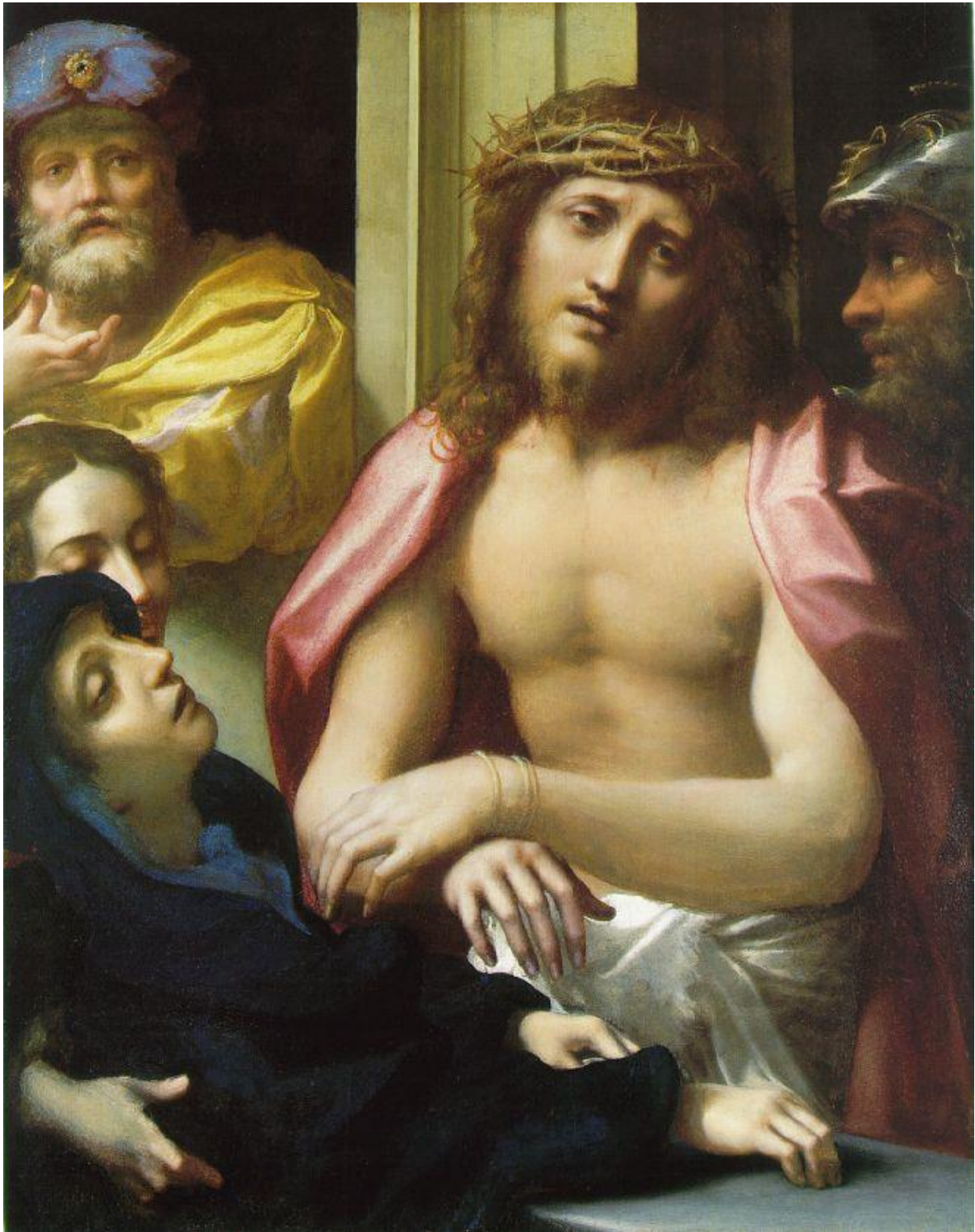


LENT COURSE WEEK FIVE

Christ before Pilate (Matthew 27: 11-30)

Christ before Pilate – Antonio Allegri (Correggio) active 1494, died 1534



The Artist

Antonio Allegri, later named Correggio after his native town near Parma, was a pioneer of illusionistic fresco decoration, his most famous accomplishment being the Dome of Parma Cathedral. His most famous paintings are Christ Taking Leave of His Mother, The Magdalen and today's subject, Christ Before Pilate. He is particularly renowned for his portrayal of the human form.

Read Matthew 27: 11-30

Today the scene has changed dramatically from last week where we saw Christ standing in dignified silence before the High Priest. Now Jesus has been stripped and his hands tightly bound and a crown of thorns brutally forced upon his head. Blood trickles down on to his scarlet robe. The robe brings a mock dignity to the scene.

It is, however, the expression of the soldier on the right of the painting that betrays the real atmosphere – scorn and hatred. The soldier's menacing stare reminds us of the torture that is but a few hours away.

As we look at the scene we are, in effect, standing where the crowd stands. Pilate, in the background has asked the crowd "Who do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus the Messiah." But Matthew records for us in his account that among the crowd where the chief priests and elders, urging them to ask for Barabbas who, we are told, was in prison for theft.

Again Pilate asks them "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" and they shout all the louder "Barabbas!" In a final attempt to placate the hostile crowd Pilate says "Then what I am to do with Jesus who is called Messiah?" The reply is deafening "Crucify him!" "Why what crime has he committed?" says Pilate. But they cry all the more "Crucify him!"

There are few more ugly scenes than a crowd and baying mob screaming for an innocent man's blood and yet it is in this highly charged scene that Correggio has chosen to set his painting.

In Jerusalem there is a bridge above one of the narrow streets which is called "Ecce Homo" – literally "Behold the Man" it is the supposed point where Pilate handed over Jesus to be crucified. In the painting his hands gesture his handing over of all responsibility.

At the bottom left of the painting is Mary, her own face full of agony as she watches helplessly as the events move towards their inevitable, brutal conclusion. Mary, in her pain is comforted by another woman who has her arm around her, probably Mary Magdalen. The evangelist records for us that at the point of the crucifixion "A number of women were also present, watching from a distance and they had followed him from Galilee."

Mary, of course, had followed him longer than anyone. From the moment the angel had announced to her "Do not be afraid, you shall bear a son and call him Jesus, and he will save

his people from their sins.” From that moment of conception Jesus had been part of her; her own son, her own flesh and blood. As she was with him at the first, so now she is at the last. As the “*Stabat Mater*” reminds us:

*“At the cross her station keeping, stood the mournful mother weeping,
Close to Jesus at the last, though her soul of joy bereaved,
Bowed with anguish, deeply grieved, now at length the sword had passed.
For his people’s sins, in anguish, there she saw the victim languish,
Bleed in torments, bleed and die, saw the Lord’s anointed taken
Saw her child in death forsaken, heard his last expiring cry.*

Mary’s gaze in the painting, like the whole of her life, points us to Jesus. Indeed, Jesus, in all his vulnerability is surely the focus of our gaze as we behold this painting.

Correggio has depicted Jesus as the bound victim, resigned to all the indignity and horror that lies ahead. Yet it is his body which dominates all others here, the same body that God, three days later, will raise in glory.

And what of Pilate - a bit player in God’s glorious master plan? Pilate gets a bad press. He was weak, yes, but he wasn’t evil. He tried hard to get Jesus released but in the end capitulated for a quiet life. The washing of his hands in public was a largely wasted gesture, more to salve his own conscience than to sway the verdict. And here, with a gesture of the hand he delivers Jesus to be crucified.

Correggio has been kind to Pilate, there is, in his eyes, a sense of indecision, a sense of doubt. Could this really be the Messiah? Could this be God’s own son? There was a part of Pilate that wanted it to be true but in the end he had neither the courage nor the will to take on the crowd.

The brutal soldiers and all they represent will get their way. The status quo must not be undermined. Anyway, what is an innocent man’s blood when compared to the possible breakdown of law and order, even a whole political system?

Jesus challenged the system, not least the religious system and that challenge was the reason for his death. Yet it was only because of that death that new values, a new order and above all a new relationship with God could come.

It is, praise God, by the spilling of His blood that we are redeemed.

*O Sacred Head sore wounded, defiled and put to scorn,
O Kingly head surrounded with mocking crown of thorn.
What sorrow mars thy grandeur, can death thy bloom deflower?
O countenance whose splendour, the host of heaven adore.*