

“By His wounds you have been healed.”

1 Peter 2:24

Scroll down to see a copy of the painting.

Most images of Christ the Good Shepherd show a gentle and tender Jesus with a sheep in His arms or on His shoulders, and all of this set, in paintings at least, against a somewhat Elysian background of green fields and beautiful countryside. The scene is meant to depict Our Lord carrying us to fresh pastures, of course, as described in Psalm 22, or bringing us home when we have wandered into other fields and got ourselves lost, as outlined in Our Lord’s parable elsewhere in the Gospels (Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15:3-7). So tender is the usual depiction of Our Lord in images of the Good Shepherd that many of them may appear almost delicate; but they are not all so.

There is at least one painting of Christ the Good Shepherd (reprinted on the newsletter) in which Our Lord appears uncharacteristically still wearing His crown of thorns, and bearing on his back what looks like a warrior’s shield of some sort. What’s more, He is leaning down and tending to a lamb caught in a very thorny set of brambles.

Immediately, several layers of meaning spring to mind.

The first thing we might call to mind, once we know that the painting is German and was painted in 1917, is that Our Lord is trying to free an innocent youth caught up in the razor-sharp edges of some barbed wire on the edge of No Man’s Land on a First World War battlefield. Or maybe it is a whole nation that is being saved, despite having been responsible for getting itself into trouble in the first place. The lamb is stuck, immobilized by the thorns, and unable to free himself. We can almost hear him bleating in pitiful despair, stranded as he is on a rocky outcrop, and far from any other source of help. Yet, for all the grey bleakness of

the rock, the sky is blue, and matches, albeit in a paler shade, the colour of the cloak worn by the lamb's rescuer.

Although none of Our Lord's other wounds are visible, His Crown of Thorns, of course, matches the thorns of the bramble in which the lamb is caught fast. The Good Shepherd does not rescue His lost lamb from the vantage point of comfort or from a position of divine superiority. Instead, He is seen to be participating in exactly the same torments and sufferings that the lamb is experiencing. What is more, precisely because the lamb is seen to be stuck on a rocky outcrop, it is evident that the Shepherd has gone out of His way to find him. Neither is there any sign of impatience or exasperation in the face of the Shepherd. Instead, He stretches out His hands as if to calm the frightened sheep, and set its fears at rest.

It is unusual to see Our Lord bearing a shield but here, on His back, is the small, round, hand-held shield – the buckler – carried so often in Old Testament accounts of battles. Indeed, in the Books of Samuel and Kings, and in the Psalms, for example, the Lord Himself is described as “a buckler to all that trust in Him,” (2 Kgs 22:31 [or 2 Sam 22:31]; Ps 17:31). It is not so much that Our Lord promises we will never suffer – that we will never get snared in the thorn bushes – but that He will always come to our rescue, and will shield us from the final and definitive consequences of our waywardness, namely everlasting death.

In this image, the Good Shepherd carries the conventional shepherd's crook, but note that He does not try to rescue the lamb by hooking him with His staff and pulling him roughly from the brambles. Rather, He reaches down carefully, and prises apart the bladed branches with His own hands, suffering them to be pierced in the process, and eases the lamb from his captivity.

And finally, there is no blood to be seen on the lamb; the only bright red colour in the picture is that of the Shepherd's robe, “His dying crimson,” as the Passiontide hymn

calls it (cf *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*). It is the Saviour's blood, not ours, that rescues the lost.

Yet there are other layers of meaning too. What resonances are there with the image of Isaac being sacrificed by his father Abraham in a lonely place atop a mountain? Here, as with Isaac, the captive is being freed.

Or is it that the ram which was, in the end, sacrificed instead of Isaac is being depicted here as a lamb being slain? Does the thorn bush on the one hand, and the Crown of Thorns on the other, make of the lamb and the Shepherd one and the same person, identifying the Lamb that was slain with the One who is also the Good Shepherd? If so, then we can see even more clearly how the Lamb that was slain did indeed undergo the same agony and anguish as those for whom He was slain.

Whatever the painter intended over a century ago, we have before us in this picture an image replete with meaning and reassurance, an image which, above all, offers hope to us all.

Scroll down to see a copy of the painting.

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German School (20th Century)
Christ the Good Shepherd - 1917