

## The Work of Mercy

### The Hermeneutics of Mercy in Christian Art

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#### **Christian myth and ethos – charity and humility**

Whatever Christian ethics may be about, at the very least it's about this: that a person will actually come to the aid of another person in need. Mercy or compassion is a key concept in Christian morality. Without making any claims for exclusivity, one can say that this morality is distinctive in terms of how it makes charity its focal point.

And this goes back a long ways. In his book on the religion of the first Christians, Gerd Theissen describes how the early Christian ethos was characterized by two values: charity and humility (or: renouncing status). Both these values find their origins in Jewish tradition. But in the actual religious practice and life of early Christians they were intensified and radicalized to such an extent that it caused the reigning pagan morality in their own group to go through a qualitative transformation.

Christian ethos – the distinctive common morality among Christians – and Christian myth – by this I mean no more here than: the original Christian story – were closely related. The early Christians believed that the religious distance between God and man had been abolished in the way of the historical Jesus. Out of his love for humanity God renounces his divine status and humbles himself by becoming a human being. In Jesus the transcendent God lovingly and in a healing way approaches humanity in its transitoriness, misery, and guilt. But alongside the humiliation there is the exaltation. The actual human being Jesus, in whom God incarnates himself, partakes of the position and the power of God as the risen one.

The ethos follows the myth in its double movement of humiliation and exaltation. Just like the love of God bridges the distance to lost humanity, in the actual behavior of one person to another one's own social boundaries are crossed. Charity is loving one's enemy (Math 4.43ff.), the alien (Luke 10:25ff.), the sinner (Luke 7:36ff.)

The deepening and radicalization of this tendency to cross boundaries in the ethos of Christian charity can only be understood if the second fundamental early Christian value – humility (*humilitas*) – is included. “... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. (Mark 10:43, 44 NIV; cf. 9.35, Math 23:11)”. In the ethos a switch of social position is in view which finds its divine example in the myth. Those in high places are supposed to give up their status, those of lowly status receive authority

### **Transfer of values – mercy**

A Christian revolution of values? Not that Christianity introduced *new* values that were unknown to pagan or Jewish morality. What is new, however, is the *mix* of values, in which charity is dissociated from its social connection to status and position and is tied to the virtue of humility.

A double transfer of values takes place, in which ethos follows myth. In the first place there is an ‘upward transfer’ of the simple morality of solidarity. The foundation of Christian charity is the ‘natural’ popular morality of being forgiving and being a good neighbor which was and is general practice among common folk. A form of being ‘neighborly’: the horizontal solidarity in which one neighbor helps another along. Already in Israel this morality of the common people was extended and radicalized by including the widow, the orphan, and the alien. Now Christianity is distinctive in that this ethic ‘of underneath’ is not restricted to the common people but is applied to everybody, regardless of social role or station. The mighty cannot claim exception to practicing ‘charity’ or ‘solidarity’ based on their political responsibility. This is the first value transfer: from the bottom up. Ethos follows myth: the humble is exalted.

Conversely – and in the second place – there is also a top-down transfer. The East and classical antiquity held to a ‘top-down ethics’ in which the social elite was supposed to contribute to the well being of its subjects. Aristocracy should have a benefactor’s mentality. On their tombstones many Egyptian officials appeal to the fact that they clothed the naked and fed the hungry. What is characteristic for the early Christian ethos is that this aristocratic ethics of beneficence (a form of vertical solidarity, of philanthropy) gets democratized. It merges with horizontal charity, the ethics of reciprocity of the common people. A top-down transfer of values

takes place. Here too ethos follows myth. After all Christians believe they will reign with Christ. Even if they are humiliated, in God's eyes they are an aristocracy in heaven, seated at the right and left side of the Lord in his kingdom (cf. Math. 20: 20; Acts. 2:26f.; 3:21; 20:6, *symbasileia*). So one should behave in a manner worthy of royalty even now, even if one is just an ordinary person. In this way the solidarity values of the upper and lower social strata are merged in early Christianity.

This Christian ethos can be summarized in the word *mercy, or compassion*. *Mercy* goes back to the Latin *misericors*, the neologism Augustine introduced to the Christian world. *Misericordia*: the heart that opens itself to the misery of others.

Two Biblical stories have informed and shaped the Christian ethics of *misericordia* (mercy/compassion) throughout the ages. In the first place the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Luke.10:25ff.) The Samaritan is the neighbor, not based on his status and thus his social duties, but solely based on his humility, by which he spontaneously interrupts his journey and takes care of the victim that has barely survived. In the second place there is Jesus' announcement and description of the last judgement in Matthew 25 (31ff.), in which the Son of Man will judge all nations (*pánta tà ethnè*) based on whether they have *helped* those in need. Every human being, without distinction, will be subject to the same test: has he had compassion on the needy neighbor "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." (Math. 25:45).

### **The Good Samaritan – the boundaries of ethical theory**

Throughout the centuries both stories have guided and directed Christians in their actual moral practice. They allowed them to teach them and inspire them, but they also let them feed their sense of guilt. After all: the ethical demand is a self-evident imperative within the framework of the Christian story of a God who humbles himself in order to exalt human beings. But at the same time it is also impossible to meet it, because the demand is so radical: it doesn't only ask people to ignore their self-interest for a while, but also to permanently keep their social status in perspective. And in addition the demand has no bounds in principle. One can never help enough, once the boundaries of a group ethic have been crossed.

Thus mercy/compassion raises questions for Christian ethics. What sort of thing is it? Are people actually able to be compassionate? What does it demand of people? And does compassion have limits? What makes people have it, or what keeps people from it? Is it possible to give shape to compassion socially and organize it institutionally?

One wonders whether a *theory of compassion* really is of much help, if we're looking for an answer to these questions. Do we really understand what happened on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem by asking the Samaritan what his reasons, motives, and purposes were, when he went ahead and helped the victim? "When push comes to shove", according to Cornelis Verhoeven in his Socrates lecture on Works of Mercy (1994), "motivations and intentions are a rather frivolous luxury. ... Compared to reality, motives are uninteresting figments of one's imagination that come a dime a dozen."

### **Visual witness**

Those who want to understand Christian ethics with me as the hermeneutic of Christian ethos, an attempt to understand and explain the actual practice of the Christian ethos, will want to look beyond theory. They might want to look at the visual arts, e.g. Art history offers a theology of the image in which compassion/mercy is explained by *showing* it. What compassion is, and what it requires of people cannot conceptually be reduced to a common denominator; however, one can *show* compassion. So a careful reading of the history of the representation of mercy will help us think through the practical implications of the Christian ethos. I want to give a number of examples of this. I will show several representations of the two Biblical passages that serve as a model for the Christian ethos: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and the summary of the Works of Mercy inspired by Math 25 and I will try to trace the testimony found in them.

Representations of the story of the Good Samaritan are known to exist from the fourth century onward, when Christianity becomes the Roman state religion. At that time, however, the allegorical interpretation, in which the Samaritan serves as a model for Christ, is dominant and will remain so for centuries. The story is read as a symbolical expression of the cosmic salvation history. The man is Adam, Jerusalem is paradise, Jericho the world, the robbers are

humanity's evil traits, the priest represents the Law, the Levite the prophets, the Samaritan is Christ, and the inn is the church.

From the Renaissance onward, however, attention begins to be paid to the story itself. The human drama in the scene is magnified. The corporeality, the drama, the subjectivity of actants – they are all allowed to speak their own language. Attention is directed to the visible and sensory reality, which is more than a vehicle for symbols, a window into eternity. The function of art changes as well. It no longer only reflects the reality of heaven, but wants to move the heart of the observer. Renaissance art not only addresses the individual viewer more; it also appeals to him more. The rhetorical theory of classical antiquity goes through a re-appraisal and becomes a guiding principle for the artist. The audience is not only called to *meditatio*, but also, by way of *compassio* – a new term introduced in the passion play – to *imitatio* (see Jauss 1982, 175). In fact one can say that only now for the first time, with this focus on the heart of the beholder, art can fully play a role in ethical encouragement. It aims to stir something up in the observer, to entice him or her to have compassion.

Consequently the theme of the Good Samaritan comes to life in a new way in Renaissance and Baroque art, often in similar composition (e.g. with Jacopo Bassano, Joh. Carl Loth, A. Elsheimer). In addition it supplies the artist an opportunity to show his skills in the landscape genre and painting the human nude. A mature example of emotional drama is the painting of Giordano Luca Giordano (1685).



It doesn't depict the actual assisting action as much as the feeling of concern and dismay of the one coming to assist and the almost impossible chasm that separates them. In this painting oil and wine have become secondary over against the distraught appearance of the Samaritan's face. But all attention is directed to the naked, white body of the victim that dominates the painting right in front, across its full width and in full light. Not the face – invisible, tilted all the way back – but the naked vulnerable torso is turned toward the viewer. It is literally a *Fremdkörper* [*foreign body*]. For the body, in its naked proximity, is at the same time so far away, that it eludes embrace, even compassion. Does a heart still beat in that chest, or is it too late for help? The boundary between helping the living and tending the dead seems to have become fluid here.

A second, earlier example ascribed to the Flemish painter Lanceloot Blondeel, (1498-1561)





The panel was painted toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and can be seen in the Groeninge museum in Bruges. It shows the Samaritan in the foreground taking care of the victim, while the priest and the Levite move away in the background. There is considerable social asymmetry between the one giving assistance and the one receiving it. The former, dressed in a turban and an expensive garment, is a man of fortune and distinction. (In similar compositions one or two servants often accompany him.) Standing over the latter he pours wine and oil on the victim's wounds. The injured man, half-lying down, is naked. His social status – if ever he had any – is all lost now. Behind the scene in the foreground we see the sequel in one

corner: the Samaritan has lifted the victim on a horse and is on his way to the inn, where, completing the right corner, he pays the innkeeper (cf. Kirschbaum 1972, 24 – 26). Is compassion being shown here? One is rather inclined to regard the scene as an instance of the aristocratic ethics of beneficence (euergetism). The moral asymmetry is maintained and continued. Neither the humility nor the confusion that it produces in the social code seem to be present in the painting. An ethics from above.

3. Yet the painted narrative cannot be concluded that easily. There is also a tension in the displayed ethos, because it remains connected with the Christian *myth*, that feeds the ethos and keeps it alive: for whoever wants to see it, the suffering Christ can be perceived in the naked victim with the loin cloth– and that is true for Giordano, but also for Blondeel. While in Medieval art the Samaritan symbolized Christ, the victim plays this role in modern art. It's as if Luke 10 is now read through the lens of Matthew 25: "...inasmuch as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (vs. 40).

This mythical charge is also visible in the paintings that the Renaissance artist Jacopo Bassano (approx. 1570) devoted to the story.





His representation is striking, because he doesn't focus on the victim (Giordano), nor on the Samaritan (Blondeel), but rather on the drama of the act of assistance itself. Bassano also painted a canvas in which the Samaritan bends over the victim and is intensely busy tending to the latter's body. The scene depicted here,

however, is about raising the victim. The change of position, characteristic of the Christian ethos, in which the higher up renounces his social status and humbles himself so that the one humbled is exalted, has been made visible. The Samaritan places himself under the victim and tries to raise him up. The flasks with oil and wine are but silent attributes. The work of mercy centers on physical exertion, intensive physical contact. Apparently humility is not a matter of feelings and emotions, but of getting down to work, getting a job done. Apparently the bending down in compassion is not an end in itself either, not a servile self-debasement out of subservience, but is aimed at 'resurrection'. Is not the Greek word for human being, *anthropos*, derived from *ana-trepein*, to lift up something, to raise high? The human being is the creature meant to move about with 'aufrechten Gang,' to live upright, in a *status erectus*. (Huizinga, undated, 214). The drama of the early Christian myth, the humiliation and the exaltation of Christ, becomes visible in the Christian ethos. Caring for the person that was beaten half to death and left at the roadside, shows caring for the crucified Christ himself. Comparing this image by Bassano with *Christ's Deposition from the Cross* by Gerard David (1484) one sees the analogy between the Samaritan raising up the victim and the beloved disciple supporting the deceased Christ as he is removed from the cross.



The naked, violated bodies in loincloths can easily be interchanged. The oil and wine the Samaritan pours into the wounds of the victim point to Mary Magdalene washing and anointing the dead Christ (depicted in green).

5. The best known depiction of the good Samaritan is probably the canvas Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890) painted in the last year of his life in Saint-Rémy.





In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the theme had regained popularity, because it expressed the democratic and national solidarity that the new middle class society needed. An ethics from below. The romantic painter Eugène Delacroix painted two canvasses with this theme, in 1850 and 1852, in order to depict his faith in the potential for solidarity present in Christianity. Van Gogh copies one of them in order to perfect his technique – as he writes to his brother Theo on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1889. The representation is classical in the sense that here too it shows the Levite and the priest moving away. The opened and empty trunk points to the robbery that has taken place. But the representation is special, because any reference to an ethics from above, the philanthropy of the prominent, is absent here. The Samaritan is just a common man from the people, with his sleeves rolled up and wearing plain slippers on his feet. His horse is a mule, far from regally harnessed. This is more a depiction of popular

neighborliness, a horizontal solidarity of one person to another, rather than the ethics of beneficence of the solid middle class citizen and administrator. Van Gogh is painting in a democratic century and clearly expresses his preference for and his proximity to the world of farmers and workers. Yet more can be seen than secular solidarity. Here too the Christian myth – with which the evangelist Van Gogh was familiar as no other – strains the ethos. When one person really comes to the aid of another person, not only aristocracy (the person helping from above), but also democracy (the person that helps as an equal) becomes unbalanced. Just like with Bassano the asymmetry of assistance is turned upside down. Those in high places and the humble trade places. As he tries to help him onto the horse, the traveler having pity is located *underneath* the victim. The former almost succumbs under the latter's heavy physical weight. The image is teeming with exertion. The emphasis is on the enormous strain that the Samaritan is under in order to lift the wounded man onto the mule. The victim clumsily holds on to him. His stocky and awkward half-naked body doesn't express beauty, human dignity, or tender vulnerability like in the art of the Renaissance or Baroque (Giordano), but merely dependence.

Apparently, Van Gogh sees an exalted person in the humbled one. However, in his depiction of this Christian change of position he does not – like Bassano – refer to the crucifixion, but to the entry into Jerusalem. The wounded man is helped unto a mule. An allusion to Jesus' 'triumphal entry' in Jerusalem, sitting upright, like a king on his horse, before he would die on the cross shortly afterwards, macabrely upright, and – according to the Christian myth – carry the sorrow of mankind on his shoulders. (Cf. Huizinga undated, 215v.)

### ***The works of mercy***

The other Bible story about mercy that has nourished and guided Christian practice in the history of Western Civilization is the story of the judgment of the Son of Man, who judges the nations. To the righteous He says: "For I was hungry, and you gave Me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me." The righteous answer that they don't remember doing any such thing, whereupon the Son of Man answers: "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even* the least *of them*, you did it to Me."

The accursed receive eternal punishment, because they have done nothing of all this (Math. 25: 31 – 46).

Since early on in the Christian tradition these six 'works of mercy' have played a role in Christian moral philosophy. From the late Middle Ages onwards they are actually referred to as Works of Mercy and included – together with the work of burying the dead based on a passage in the book of Tobit (1,17f.; 2,8) – in the religious instruction and moral theology of the church.

During the period of the Counter Reformation renewed and particular attention was paid to the works of mercy, also in the arts. Over against the sense that grace was seemingly made absolute in Protestant preaching, the importance of good works was emphasized. In Protestantism attention for the works of mercy seemed to fade away accordingly. Nevertheless the memory of the works of mercy was kept alive there, not so much in dogmatics or in theological ethics, but notably in the actual welfare work of the church –characterized among other things as the Christian Service of Mercy by A.Kuyper. This also emerges from how the theme is represented in art since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In Haarlem Jan de Bray painted his three works of mercy in 1663 commissioned by the Reformed Diaconate on behalf of the Heilige Geest Gasthuis, an orphanage run by the diakonate.



There is giving drink, feeding and clothing. The profuse symbolism of dressing the orphans is striking here; they are not *getting* dressed,

but *changing* dress; a symbol of their conversion to Protestantism, which they underwent as they were accepted into the orphanage. (Van Bühren, 1998, 180f.)

At this time, however, the theme has already enjoyed a wealth of history in Western art (see for this especially Van Bühren, 1998). From the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward the works of mercy are depicted in book illuminations (Psalterium of Melisande, 1139), relief sculpture (the gate of Gallus of the Münster cathedral in Basle, approx. 1170), stained glass windows and relic shrines (Elisabeth church in Marburg/Lahn, 1240/50 resp. 1235/49), in baptisteries (Parma, approx. 1196) and on baptismal fonts (Hildesheim, approx. 1225/30).

The depicted works of mercy tell a story that is related to the story of the Good Samaritan. Yet the emphases are different. The Good Samaritan, that is compassion as interruption, as excess, as moment, as spontaneity. Conversely, the works of mercy, neatly codified into seven moral maxims, try – literally – to supply a tractable interpretation to the intractable command. An attempt to institutionalize compassion. Mercy, not as a burning necessity, but as a social duty.

Initially the workers of mercy are still saints (Martin of Tours, Elisabeth of Thuringia). Later they will be the dignitaries of cities, wealthy families, trustees of the church or deacons, depending on how poor relief is organized in society. The images were hanging in churches, guest and poor houses, in the houses of the wealthy – places where the works were presented as an example to their observers. In many representations – in a study of Van Bühren 167 have been collected – one hardly recognizes Christian compassion as the spontaneous humility that results in a temporary suspension and radical reversal of the social code. The works of mercy are generally depicted as the exemplary expressions of an ethics of beneficence. A comfortable distance is maintained between the benefactor and the recipient. This distance remains. It is clear who the benefactor is and who the recipient. In the representations the rich dress of the merciful generally contrasts sharply with the nakedness, the simple or paltry outfit of the recipient (Schoutsen, 2001, 74).

But still: as long as the Christian myth is around, the ethos is not left at peace. The social asymmetry of the ethics of beneficence is pictorially subjected to an inner strain, as the eschatological context



of Math 24 is present to a greater extent in the depiction of the works of mercy. Apparently mercy is not without obligation, it is more than social code morality; from a religious perspective mercy is at the same time a matter of life and death, of eternal salvation and damnation. In the physical work of mercy, the soul of a person is at stake. Doing good apparently is not an ethical principle among others, but a matter of *ultimate concern*.

I must limit myself to a few pictures and some explanatory comments with them. Perhaps the panel series of de Meester of Alkmaar (1504, Rijksmuseum, cf. Schoutsen 2001) is the most renowned of these.



It had been hanging in the Grote Kerk (St. Laurentius) in Alkmaar until 1919. A public space that all the townspeople would frequent from morning till night. The patriciate of the town that commissioned this painting wanted to use it to entice its fellow townspeople to be generous as well. One could well call the large colorful work a ‘huge advertising billboard for good causes’ (Schouten, 2001, 62).

It is the oldest painting on this theme that has been preserved in the Northern Netherlands. Each panel shows a townscape that is orderly, tidy and clean to such an extent, that it must be an idealized view of the town from the late middle ages. One can find no filth or junk at all. The works of mercy – the only action in the compartments – are portrayed as a regular well-oiled activity. Poor relief also followed the iron rhythm of the ecclesiastical year until long after the Middle Ages. On church feasts the poor and their benefactors concentrated on the economy of salvation which they both were part of. Because of their shared affectless facial expressions and their unstrained mutual proximity in their various scenes, one does not observe any shrill dramatic contrasts between the benefactors and those in need of aid (cripples, aged, beggars, pilgrims). (Van Bühren, 1998, 53f.) Striking is the figure of Christ who is positioned among the needy – without a halo, yet somewhat

obliquely. His gaze is not directed at the benefactor, nor at the needy, but at the viewer: 'And you, what are you going to do for me?'



The central panel depicts the burial of the dead (perhaps a victim of the plague?). Above this the Last Judgment is shown. But with de Meester of Alkmaar the Judgment does not affect the scene in a dramatic sense. Not much is made of it. For the sake of brevity it is represented in the symbolical shape of the so-called *Deesis*. Christ on the throne, flanked on the left and the right by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, the saints most suited to make supplication for even the greatest of sinners. Though not very dramatic, this nevertheless does, albeit in a modest way, place the simple work of mercy within the central and ultimate framework of heaven and hell, death and judgment.

In the triptych of Barend of Orley (1488 - 1541), commissioned by the Antwerp 'Kamer van huysarmen' that modesty is gone.



The Judgment dominates in the form of a big panorama, flanked on either side by the works of mercy (on the left: giving drink to the thirsty and nursing the sick, and to the right: handing out clothing and bread, freeing a prisoner, and taking care of someone that's

dying. On the central panel the dead are being buried.) The Judgment is staged like a Hollywood disaster movie. It is brought home to the observer with devastating clarity that with pursuing or not pursuing works of mercy his eternal salvation is at stake.

2. The representation of charity by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1559) is also well known. It is the first to break out of a static depiction of separate series of works of mercy by picturing them all as one dynamic whole circling around a village square. The viewer is pulled into a symbolization of Christian charity within the framework of an ostensibly profane village scene. Charity, a female figure personifying divine charity stands in the center, with a burning heart in her hand, and on her head a pelican opening up his own chest.



Bruegel is allegorizing mercy using an abstract symbol, which at the same time is made concrete by the seven-part story that is arranged around it (starting below at the left and going clockwise - the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given drink, prisoners are visited, the dead are buried, strangers are housed, the sick are visited, the naked are clothed). The moralizing caption all the way at the bottom of the margin – not visible here – reinforces the graphic narrative style: ‘Hope you will have to go through the same that befalls others, for this can encourage you to offer your help, by often



putting yourself in the position of the needy that find themselves in misery, and to share in their trying fate.'

Bruegel wants to persuade the viewer by appealing to his ability to identify: the distress that has afflicted the other person, can easily afflict you. You will be more willing to take his fate seriously, the more you imagine participating in his situation.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century *persuasio*, an aim of the rhetoric of antiquity, is deployed at a new middle class audience in modern painting too. The painter wants to teach, entertain, and move (*docere, delectare, movere*). (Van Bühren 1998, 58) The social drama increases, but at the same time the eschatological tension fades away. Ethos detaches itself from myth. In allegorizing mercy ethics is at the same time made secular and subjective. Mercy/compassion becomes an ethics of solidarity.

3. The third example is not as well known. The following depiction of the six works of mercy by the Kampen painter Ernst – or perhaps he was called Jacob – Maler can be seen in the Stedelijk [Municipal] Museum of Kampen.



The work may have been commissioned by one of the Kamper Gasthuizen [Kampen hospitals] and exhibited there as well. While in the first eight centuries poor relief was mainly managed by monasteries and urban bishops, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward lay people were also mobilized to establish and administer hospitals and houses for the poor. Mercy became the individual duty of the Christian in a middle class urban culture and *caritas* [charity] a government responsibility. In Ernst Maler's scene one can see that the religious framework for the works of mercy has almost completely disappeared. One does have to say 'almost'; the mother with child sitting at the table for the poor is still a reminder of the Christian context of charity, which is thus still present to some extent in veiled symbolism. The table is at the center, a symbolic reference to the table of the poor that one used to be set up at the church for the distribution of alms. In the foreground one can recognize clothing the poor, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, in the background strangers are housed and prisoners and the sick are visited.

4. The last painting is the altar piece with the six works of mercy that Caravaggio painted in 1607 for the Chiesa del Monte della Misericordia in Naples, and which is still located there.



It is a tightly packed, dynamic composition, which only yields its complex secrets to closer observation (see Van Bühren, 1998, 193 – 210). Eschatology, so overwhelmingly present with Van Orley, so palpably absent with Bruegel and Maler, is out there again. But this time no longer in a standard symbolic shape (de Meester of Alkmaar), or in an apocalyptic large screen scene (Van Orley), but in a subtle theology of light. Christian myth and Christian ethos are impressively woven together.

A pair of angels is watching from heaven, but in its forward rushing and embracing movement it is so directed at earth's vicissitudes, that it almost crosses the boundaries with the earth. A Madonna with child, added later by the painter, are watching from heaven. Underneath this scene the six works of mercy unfold in two successive diagonals. On the right one sees the dead receiving burials (1) – only the feet of those carried to the grave are seen – and the episode of the so-called Carita Romana (the mythological depiction of Cimon's daughter Pero who gives her father, who is in prison, drink from her breast), in which both visiting prisoners (2) as well as feeding the hungry (3) is expressed. On the left in the foreground the naked are clothed by a feathered St. Martin, who shares his cloak with a beggar (4). Next to this St. James [Jacob] of Compostela and his inviting host allude to housing the stranger (5). Behind this Samson, drinking from the skull of an ox, represents giving drink to the thirsty (6). And isn't that the sick person that we see in the vague contours of the boy behind St. Martin's naked beggar (7)

The painting derives its tension from the skilful *clair-obscur* (*chiaroscuro*), with which a heavenly light, a divine grace, falls on the works of mercy from the upper left, without any of this being noticed in the depiction of the works themselves. The compassionate do their job on earth, and no more than that. The divine added value, the light from above ('Lord, when did we see you hungry..?') is only visible to the beholder, but is not noticed by the righteous themselves. Their backs are turned towards it. They don't know that the Christ child is so close to them. Only in the sight of the beholder who catches the heavenly light and knows how to read its true provenance and merits, the unity of heaven earth is realized. For him or her it must be clear: 'Whoever loves his brother lives in the light.' (1 John 2, 10) The angels and the Madonna look on from heaven, but in spite of their closeness, they don't actually participate in the scene. The works of mercy are performed by human beings, and only by them.

The painting also derives its dramatic force from the fact that the characters come so close to the space of the beholder. The picture area is so narrow; the scenes are so fronted on the canvas that they almost fall out. With this Caravaggio shows himself to be a master in the rhetorical art of persuasion; there is no escaping the challenge that the narrative poses to the beholder.



In conclusion. (Slide 24) What does a short overview of the history of the depiction of mercy/compassion yield toward a theological ethics that sees itself as a hermeneutics of the Christian ethos? For example this.

- That with compassion motives and reasons are less important than actual behavior.
- That, whoever compassionately takes care of another person, puts pressure on, cuts across and reverses established social roles and positions by raising the victim and humbling himself (cf. Bassano).
- That the latter is not an idea, a subtle *theologoumenon* that can be caught in a concept, but a physical and hard work (cf. Van Gogh).
- That Christ is present in the victim (as in relatively modern art), but also in the helper (as in medieval art).
- And finally: that morality is never merely a social code, a functional system of 'standards and values', but that something ultimate, something final, something absolute is at stake in the way people come to each other's aid or refuse to do so, which determines our value as human beings. (Cf. Moyaert, 1999, 89) In the language of the Christian myth: that mercy/compassion is about the salvation of the soul.

## Literature

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