

Matt's Message for Epiphany:
"When the Christ Child Started Squirming Around"

There is a room in Florence, Italy that is possibly one of the most wonderful rooms in the world. It's in an art gallery called the Uffizi, one of the oldest galleries in Europe. It is Room Two. "Room Two, Uffizi" is famous throughout the world. Well, famous to lovers of medieval art. I love how it's such a low number. I have no idea what's in Room One in the Uffizi. I've never heard of "Room One, Uffizi." Maybe it's a bathroom or a broom closet. But Room Two is a very big deal: a room of wonders that gives us a glimpse into the heart of art and humanity and divinity.

I really like hanging around here in the Kawarthas and I'm not a big fan of travelling, so I've never been to Uffizi, Room Two. Let's be honest: it's unlikely that I'll ever go there. And anyways, I have a 700 page, fully illustrated (with smooth, glossy pages) book called *Florence: The Paintings and Frescoes, 1250-1743*, which I got for \$12 in the bargain section at Chapters. Opening this book is probably *better* than going to Florence. I can take as much time as I want with each painting. There are no crowds jostling me. And most importantly, I can read about each painting and painter for as long as I want, so I get the historical context and art theory that helps me enjoy it all. I can even go to my bookshelf and get out Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* and read a full chapter-long biography of one of the painters, then go back to looking at the paintings. They'd never let me do that if I was actually in an art gallery! I'd get kicked out for sure. Plus, I can drink coffee and eat popcorn while I view the art in my own home.

Now, I realise that religious art isn't for everyone. Some people say that it can actually distract the Christian from God. And it's fine to feel that way. Maybe for some people it does. For myself, though, when I'm meditating on a painting of a scene from Christ's life, I find that it draws me into the situation. The talents and techniques of the artist tell me things about the scene that I may never have thought of before. One of the ways I pray is by flipping to a painting in one of my art books and staring intently at it for a long time. Then I'll close my eyes and allow myself to "hear" what God might be telling me about the biblical event I'm studying.

Anyways, Room Two demonstrates a fascinating progression or evolution in how the baby Jesus was portrayed by Christian artists. (If you don't normally find medieval art fascinating, hopefully you will after this "Matt's Message.")

In Christian art, there have always been two scenes from Christ's life that have been depicted the most: Christ on the cross, and Christ as a baby in Mary's lap. These two scenes suitably balance the anguish and joy of Christ' earthly life. Since it's almost Epiphany, when we celebrate the magi worshipping Christ, I'm writing about Christ in Mary's lap, or the Virgin and Child, or the *Maestà*. (Room Two of the Uffizi is sometimes called the *Sala delle Tre Maestà*, which is, I guess, *the Room of the Three Maestàs*.)

In Room Two are three of the most beautiful, most important Virgin and Child paintings on earth, painted respectively by Cimabue, Duccio, and Giotto. These paintings show how peoples' view of Christ was changing in the 14th century.

Through the centuries of the early church, Mary and Jesus were portrayed as iconic, unrealistic, two-dimensional, weightless figures, usually staring directly at the person looking at the painting. This style was not meant to be a realistic, warm, comforting picture of a mom and her baby. This was St. Mary, the Virgin Mother, holding in her lap the King of the Universe, the Eternal Word of God, the Saviour of humankind. Christ was often painted not as a baby at all, but as a small adult, standing in Mary's lap. He often looks wise (even all-knowing, perhaps) and is bestowing a blessing on the viewer. Mary usually looks like a stern, powerful queen.

Now, unlike many modern art critics, I'm not judging this style negatively at all. No, no, no, far from it! This abstract, unrealistic art was meant to transport the viewer into sacred space, into a direct experience with Christ and his mother. And it did what it was supposed to. To us, these ancient paintings appear unnatural and strange, but if you get used to them, you can have powerful religious experiences while contemplating them. And that was the point. The ancient artists weren't trying to paint a nice realistic picture of a couple of people; they were trying to bring the Christian into an experience of God through Christ. For centuries, this style satisfied the Church and brought worshippers into powerful contact with their God.

But in the high Middle Ages (late 1200s and early 1300s), something new was happening. The 2-dimensional, iconic representations were giving way to a more realistic, natural style. And the angels and saints were starting to glow with joy and...*humanity!* For instance, here's an angel from the 1000s or 1100s, ie, the earlier, iconic *Romanesque* period:



I love this angel: very peaceful and otherworldly. The elongated pointer finger probably symbolises great power and effective blessings. But it's not realistic or really happy.

Then, in the mid 1200s, this wonderful face appeared in the stone on Reims Cathedral in France:

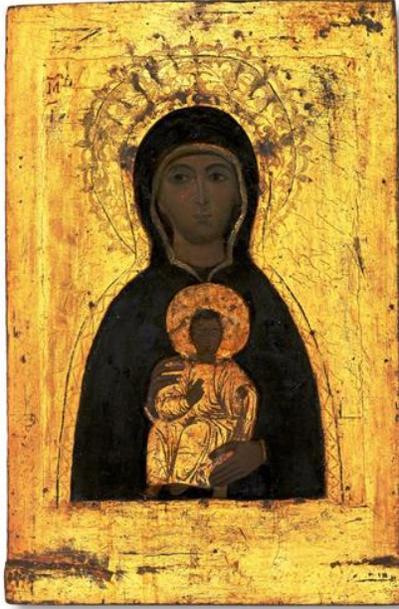


People always say the Renaissance is when art became more realistic and joyful but that idea can't be more wrong. It was the Gothic, or High Medieval, period when human achievement and exuberance began to exist side by side with religious devotion. It was the age of the Gothic Cathedrals and the first Universities and the first tales of King Arthur and Lancelot and Guinevere. The "Smiling Angel" expresses this joy and confidence perfectly. In fact, this face is so famous it's sometimes just called "The Smile of Reims." If Neil Armstrong's step onto the moon was a "giant leap for mankind," so was the carving of this face by some anonymous journeyman sculptor. (Personally, I think this angel's face is way more important than yet another technological conquest of nature by Western Man, but that's just me...) In Gothic art, Christians were beginning to reach new heights of spirituality and human ability. The saints and angels were appearing as real, approachable humans.

But it was a little later, in Italy, that this new confidence and realism really took off. The place was Florence and the man was Giotto. In a way no-one had before, Giotto started painting people as fully human, 3-dimensional, distinct individuals. Figures had always appeared to be floating on air, which gave them the celestial quality that the artists were going for. Not Giotto's people. Giotto's people are *heavy*. Gloriously heavy. His style is a

powerful affirmation of the human body itself. People gesture expressively and dramatically. Perhaps Giotto's art is even giving us the great message that we can be fully human *and* spiritual.

Here's an earlier Virgin and Child icon:



Again, I'm not saying anything negative about this older style. The gold background, the serene expression of Mary, the way her hands are supporting her baby, all these things are powerful, skillful artistic expression.

But in Room Two of the Uffizi in Florence, a whole new age of Christian art can be observed. First there is Cimabue's Virgin and Child. Cimabue was Giotto's supporter and teacher. Then there is Duccio's Virgin and Child, the largest of the three. In Duccio's painting, the angels are particularly inviting and approachable, leading us into the heavenly realm in contemplation. Then there is Giotto's Virgin and Child:



Here we have a very human-looking mother, and a nice, healthy, chubby baby. It's still a very celestial scene: gold background, angels with halos, distant, thoughtful expression on the baby's face. But it looks like a real mother and child. It's very natural and human. And there's one amazing little detail that attests to Giotto's genius for realism: the pillow Mary is sitting on is actually curling up at the ends, showing that she is a real person with a real body and real weight. She is really *not* floating.

And Mary's expression is very distinctive. She is a unique individual. There's just the hint of a smile on her lips. It's like a *Mona Lisa* smile before the actual *Mona Lisa*. Even her eyes betray just a trace of pride and happiness. It's like she's saying, "I'm not going to shout about it, but my child is the saviour of the world." I personally see a relaxed confidence in her face and her slightly reclining pose.

But despite all this new naturalism, it's still very *iconic*, which is what the people wanted. Mary is looking at us as if we're in the room with her and her child. And she's seated on a golden throne which the poor Mary of Nazareth certainly never sat on during her earthly life. It's a fascinating mixture of realistic and abstract art. Remember that name: Giotto. He was the best!

But there's more going on here than just a new artistic movement; the French Gothic sculptors and the Italian painters of the early 1300s were effectively expressing an idea that is central to the whole Christian faith: *incarnation*. When Christ became incarnate, he became fully human while remaining fully divine. This means it's not enough to portray Christ as a more-than-human, spiritual, heavenly being. We have to understand and treasure his humanity. That's exactly what Giotto was doing.

And to take it a step further, this means we shouldn't expect *ourselves* to be more-than-human, spiritual, heavenly beings. We have to understand and treasure our own humanity. The incarnation is a shocking affirmation of the reality and potential of the human person. Just as Christ is divine *and* human, we are spiritual *and* earthly. Maybe we'd love to be angelic, but we're not. We make mistakes and we sin and the mistakes are interesting and the sin can be forgiven. We grow. We change. We fail. We laugh. We cry. We're human. And the Spirit fills our minds and bodies, helping us to do great things from time to time, while allowing us to go down wrong roads as well. We rise and fall, win and lose, and our life is the journey of a unique, interesting, clumsy human.

The ancient, 2-dimensional figures were wonderful, but we don't want to be like that. We are 3-dimensional humans with our own facial expressions and personalities. The Christian faith is not supposed to suppress our humanity, but to nurture and encourage it. Some ancient spiritual traditions (like Platonism and Gnosticism) believe that the person has to escape or transcend their bodies to become a mature, spiritual being. The body is a cage for us to break free from, they say. But the Church has always tried to be firmly rooted in the incarnation which tells us that our bodies are part of who we are, not just an annoyance or a burden. Often the Church has strayed too far in the spiritual direction, telling people to be more spiritual than physical, but art, music, scrap-booking, food, liturgy, and sports are all great things that help us to be fully human, ie, incarnational beings: spiritual *and* physical.

On the Feast of Epiphany, we celebrate the Magi, astronomers from the east, coming to worship the Christ Child. Here is a Giotto painting of the scene:



When the Magi finally arrived after their long journey and knelt before Jesus, they found a real human child, not a God just *appearing* to be human. It's hugely important that we never neglect Christ's humanity because that can lead us to neglect our own humanity. If we focus only on His divinity, we can force ourselves to be too pure and spiritual and perfect. We can end up hating our imperfections, or denying we have them. We have to accept ourselves as fallen, imperfect, but redeemed. We're always striving to grow and learn and be more Christ-like. The Bible gives us firm guidelines and we have to live in community with our family and our society. But we're not supposed to just disappear into our religion. We have minds and emotions and plans. And then those plans change. We have to allow our humanity to happen. Enjoy our personhood. Express our personality. Admit when we've sinned and ask for forgiveness.

We are often told that, as Christians, we have to be good examples. That's absolutely true. But we are not icons. We can't be simple cardboard cut-outs. We all have our own distinct bodies and minds and souls. It's an amazing fact that – out of about 7 or 8 billion of us – no two humans are exactly alike. How does God even do that?! Out of all the humans who have lived on this earth, there have been no exact repeats. That's incredible. Somehow, we are all unique, so we should never be silenced or trapped by our own – or others' – expectations. What's important is to be real, authentic humans, inhabiting our bodies, feeling our emotions, and really living our lives on this earth.

One last thing about Room Two of the Uffizi. Although the three famous Virgin and Child paintings are more natural and realistic than previous styles, the Christ Child is still

quite still and contemplative and...iconic. But there's one more painting in the room: Giotto's *Virgin and Child with Saints (the Badia Polyptych)*.



In this painting, Christ is positively *squirming*. One hand is either grabbing Mary's dress or pushing her away, while the other hand is clutching her fingers. It's like he's trying to get away from her while holding onto her at the same time. She's leaning away from him, but also supporting him with her left hand.

Here we finally have a real baby. All those who have taken care of babies know that they can be very hard to hold onto. Giotto isn't hiding this fact. Sometimes babies want to be held; sometimes they don't. And sometimes they want both of those things at the same time. And we're like that too. We want God to hold and protect and guide us, but also want our freedom and individualism. We're confused. We get upset. We're human. We squirm and push and pull. And that's okay. We're not icons. We're not 2-dimensional. No-one had a more distinct, surprising, powerful personality than Christ himself. Giotto wants to let the Christ Child be human. (This was taken even farther in another *Virgin and Child* down the hall in the Uffizi where the baby Jesus actually appears to be sucking his thumb.)

This Epiphany as we journey with the Magi and kneel before the Christ Child, let's remember His – and our – humanity. Let's not expect anyone to be perfect – least of all ourselves. Perfection isn't human. Growing, learning, changing, squirming...that's human.