

Jesus Alone

1.

Could you not watch one hour with me? While the sleeping disciples seem washed out, unconcerned perhaps, in a dazzling spotlight of whites, the array of colors around them render Christ's suffering strikingly palpable. On the brink of feeling diminished, forgotten and alone, the people in a tiny village of Northern Cameroon, have also endured their Gethsemanes, struggling against indifference to find for themselves -- their own faces, their culture and indigenous spirituality within the Gospel stories. But some people still wonder, Why an African Christ? They have answered with their art: These images belong to Africans as much as stained glass windows belong to a Cathedral, We must not restrict ourselves to one period in history or the cultural forms of one people. The creation of a Black Christ does not diminish at all, the historic Christ. On the contrary, it enriches and enhances the universal meaning of the Incarnation.

2.

Canadian artist, Michael O'Brien, immerses Gethsemane in a tangible dark with a distant shimmering moon rising behind Jesus. Only three wind-blown cypress trees on the horizon suggest a Garden, while an immense black canyon between Jesus and the hill beyond, accentuates the danger, the darkness of the world. A bent and pensive figure of Jesus, deserted and desolate, stares ahead and beyond us -- his anguish etched in a moon-lit garden of reds and black. As the poet T. S. Eliot prays: I said to my soul, be still and let the dark come upon you \ [for this dark] is the darkness of God. O'Brien writes of his painting: Jesus is fully human in all things but sin. He suffers in his heart, mind, body and soul. Gethsemane is the moment when he feels with greatest intensity, the weakness of our humanity and the malice of the enemy.

3.

Christ Comforted In contrast with the first two paintings, Chinese artist George Wang visualizes Gethsemane as a luscious and peaceful rural landscape, a fertile meadow where weary disciples may rest contented, and soft-edged mountains stand as nature's loyal witnesses to a tormented Jesus. There is only hint though, of His agony, reflected metaphorically in the thorny, contorted, dead tree to the right. Father take this cup from me. . . His face seems resigned as he accepts his Chalice and solace from a young angel above him. This is the only station in the collage, with a comforting angel, coming from heaven to give him strength. In his anguish he prayed even more earnestly and sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. (Luke 22)

4.

Christ Abandoned For Scots-Irish landscape artist, Dorothy Walker the words of agony Jesus spoke at Gethsemane seem to reflect not a garden, but a forsaken wasteland at the bottom of a stone quarry. Jesus' prostrate form is echoed visually in the twisted canyon wall behind him where a laughing, mocking crowd of party-goers and soldiers descend the cliff behind him. Are these the ones who will betray him? In a Stations of the Cross written for Migrant Workers they pray in empathy, "There is no work here. Return to your country, because here you are a lazy nuisance, and a vagrant. I have family to feed. I have nowhere to turn. Our neighbors insult us, those around make us their laughing-stock."

5.

In contrast with his Last Super celebrating community among the Plains Indians, artist Richard West explores the Navajo traditions with his vibrant painting of Jesus in Gethsemane -- silent, alone and desolate in the Southwestern Desert of New Mexico. Brilliant, almost garish colors surround him in this seeming wasteland. The Navajo Creation-centered worldview sees everything in life as interconnected. So whether the desert is empty, dusty miles of chaparral and gutted roads or a field of wild flowers and blossoming beneath an endless blue sky, the people must walk in beauty, and endure. For Christians, a Desert Spirituality begins in a spacious openness--actually or symbolically--to discover a silence and solitude that reveals God. The desert is built for kenosis, the self-emptying of Jesus who was perfectly open to God and the fullness of resurrection. The desert is the way of emptiness and fullness.

6. In contrast to Jesus in the American Desert, Indonesian artist Wajan Turin brings to Gethsemane, a fine tropical garden indeed, -- luscious, aromatic and tropical! This young Balinese artist painted Gospel themes through the eyes, hearts and social customs of his people. Christ prays in this Far Eastern garden, comforted with a riot of perfumed blossoms, delightful exotic birds, a small waterfall and pond. The disciples too are tucked in, sleeping among the flowers. This image may come as a shock after seeing Gethsemane in a desert. Attentive to surviving new dangers from insects and cactus, reported one visitor, she discovered a new calm that slammed me into the immediate present. No past no future only a naked now -- like a single-celled organism suddenly exposed to wonder. The desert is not desolate, not empty. It is a place for real spiritual awakening and strength as it was for Jesus and Moses -- a crucible where anything can happen. The task and deepest thirst of my spiritual life since then has been to find the desert within.

