

April 8, 2023

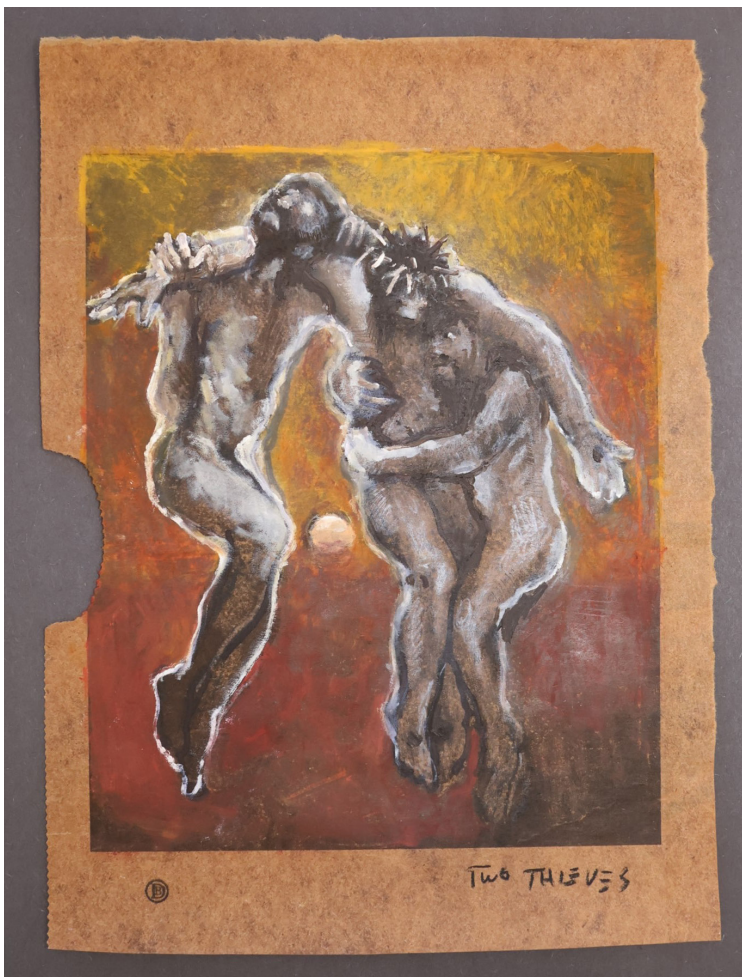
Dying Sorrow A Holy Week Reflection

BY BISHOP PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

***“The mystery
of seeing is
seeing the
mystery.”***

~ DANIEL BONNELL, ARTIST

Daniel Bonnell, *Two Thieves*, 2022
Mixed media on grocery bag paper



Yesterday, on Good Friday, we opened a new art exhibition at St. Matthew’s Cathedral in Laramie titled [*Dying Sorrow*](#), which will run through the Easter season. It is a moving exhibition featuring the acclaimed contemporary sacred artist Daniel Bonnell, whom I have known for 33 years. Daniel has studied under some of the renowned artists and designers of the 20th century, such as the photographer Ansel Adams, painter Edward Ross, and designer Milton Glaser.

The artwork in this exhibition, as in all of Daniel’s work, is full of emotion. He sees each of his artistic creations as an act of devotion. He believes, “All artists are only midwives that enable creativity to emerge from the Eternal.” This is demonstrated not just in his art, but in his writing as well. He wrote an inspiring book a few years ago titled *Shadow Lessons*, which is all about his experience of teaching art in the inner city of Savannah to “at-risk” high school students.

About 13 years ago, he started to paint primarily on grocery bag paper, which is the medium he used for *Dying Sorrow*. In so doing, he is expressing his belief that all real beauty finds rest on a stage of humility. Embodying a Franciscan approach to spirituality, he writes, “True beauty is received on a stage of humility; Christ born in a cave, the cross revealing power in weakness - even sacred paintings on a grocery bag.”

After painting on the grocery bag paper, once it is dry, he crunches it all up into a ball. Unballing it, he then soaks the work in water, and once dry, irons it. In so doing, he sees it transformed into a work of even greater beauty. There is a lot of symbolism to the process – creation, baptism, death, resurrection and the heat of transformation. Lastly, he applies olive oil and/or frankincense to each piece. Many of these pieces retain the smell of the oils.

Dying Sorrow takes its title from a Medieval Latin poem ascribed to St. Bernard de Clairvaux, written in the 12th century, that was put into hymn form in the 17th century, now titled “O Sacred Head Now Wounded.” It is often sung on Good Friday. In its third verse we sing:

What language shall I borrow
to thank thee, dearest Friend,
for this, *thy dying sorrow*,
thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever;
and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
outlive my love to thee.

The exhibition’s title is a play on these two words – Dying Sorrow. The artwork is primarily about Jesus’ death, and the tremendous sorrow of that moment, which we commemorate during Holy Week. However, the title also communicates that ultimate sorrow dies due to Jesus overcoming death. Hence, Jesus’ resurrection is the ultimate death of sorrow. The title Dying Sorrow is meant to be interpreted both ways in the exhibition.

Daniel Bonnell was inspired for this exhibition by work of Kahlil Gibran, the early 20th century Lebanese American poet-artist, often known for his best-selling book titled *The Prophet*, which is celebrating the 100th anniversary of its publication this year. Gibran was born in 1883 in Lebanon into a Maronite Catholic family, which is an Eastern-rite Church in communion with Rome. As a young boy he immigrated with his family to Boston, like many “Syrians,” as they were referred to then, were doing at that time.

Gibran was both an artist and a writer. Like Daniel Bonnell and his artwork, Gibran was intensely focused on Jesus. As Gibran dug deeply into his own Maronite Christian tradition to find its core essence, he found himself discovering the figure of Jesus in a new way. In 1923, his book *The Prophet* was released, quickly gaining worldwide acclaim. However, he was already working on what would be his longest and last book, titled *Jesus the Son of Man*. Having worked on it most of his adult life, through it he sought to return the Jesus that he felt had been disfigured in the West back to his Middle Eastern origins. In his New York studio, he hung a large tapestry of a Middle Eastern Jesus on the wall above an altar-like table with brass candlesticks. He published this creative masterwork just three years before he died at the age of 48.

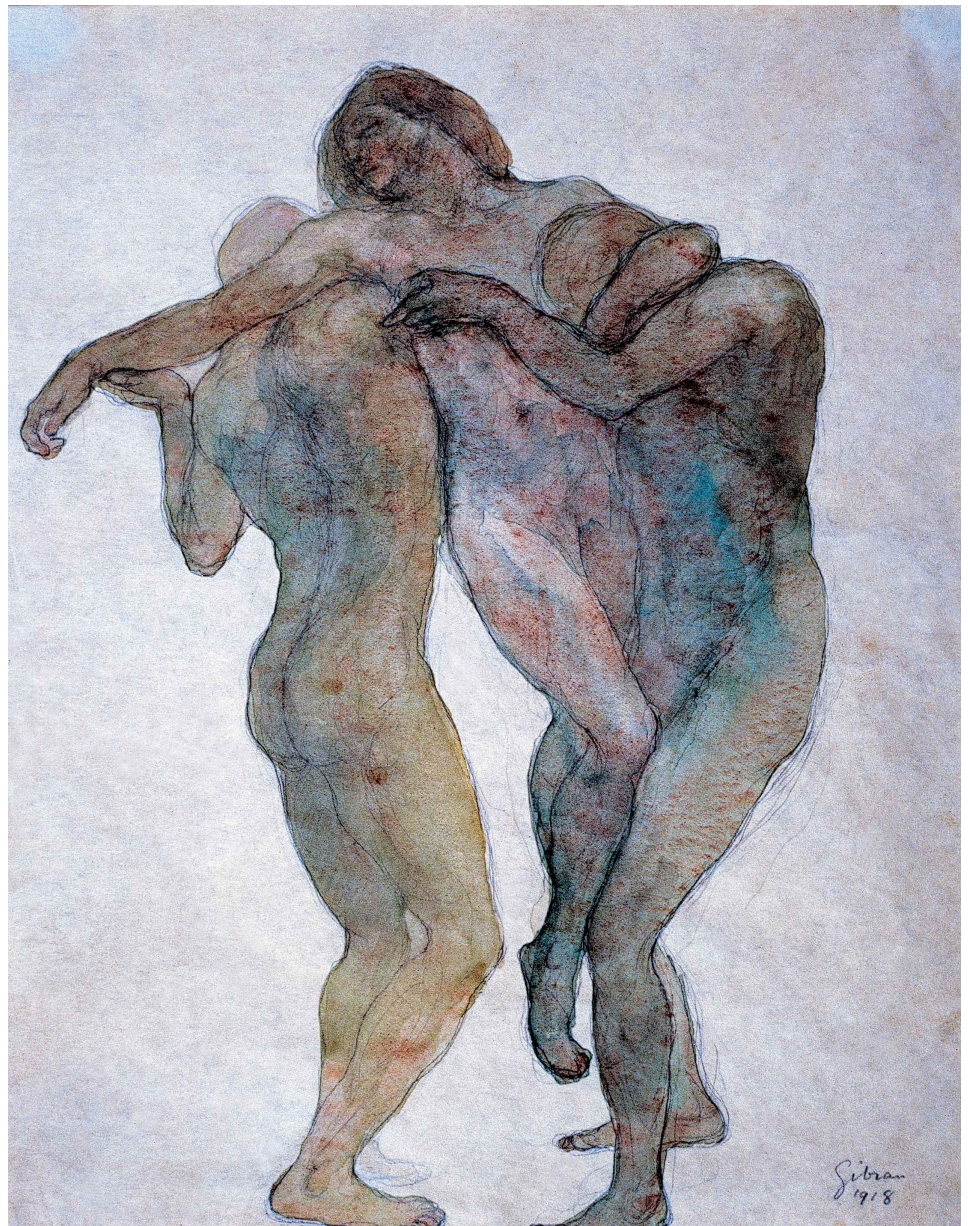
Gibran came to see the person of Jesus as far beyond just Christianity, and instead as a Universal Sage for all humanity. In Jesus, he was naturally drawn to the radical aspect of his all-embracing inclusive love and the strength of his humility. He wrote: “His life is the symbol of Humanity. He shall always be the supreme figure of all ages.” He also viewed Jesus to be the greatest of all artists and poets, seeing him as “The Master Poet... who makes poets of us all.”

***“For in one soul are contained
the hopes and feelings of all
Mankind.”***

~ KAHLIL GIBRAN, POET-ARTIST

Years before his book *Jesus the Son of Man* came to fruition he wrote to a friend: “My greatest hope now is to be able to paint the life of Jesus as no one did before. My art can find no better resting place than the personality of Jesus...all my life the wonder of him has grown on me.” *Jesus the Son of Man* was the longest and last book Gibran wrote before his death, and some see it as a sort of “fifth gospel.” In it, he delivers a mesmerizing picture of the essence of Jesus.

However, while his last book was about Jesus, his first published book was a collection of his drawings, including two works on Jesus’ crucifixion. Published in 1918 as *Twenty Drawings*, the works were titled *Crucified* and *The Triangle*. Each are wash drawings that portray two human figures holding onto a third figure. It is the traditional image of Christ between the two thieves – but there are no explicit religious elements such as the cross, blood or nails to be seen.



Kahlil Gibran, *The Triangle*, 1918

In Gibran’s opinion, the Crucifixion was the highest expression of the greatness of Christ – addressing the juxtaposing of suffering and joy. Writing of Jesus, Gibran said, “For in one soul are contained the hopes and feelings of all Mankind.” In *Jesus the Son of Man* he wrote; “He was a man of joy; and it was upon the path of joy that He met the sorrows of all men. And it was from the high roofs of His sorrows that He beheld the joy of all men.”

Gibran infused in his writing the vacillating emotions and expressions of joy and sorrow, permeating much of his worldview and, in turn, his art and writing. In the face of personal suffering, he allowed himself to feel deeply; but in that same well of depth, he found its counterpart, the beauty of joy and new life.

The life gift of joy and sorrow is a theme that Gibran addressed in his writings throughout the rest of his life. He comforts his readers by saying: “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.”



Daniel Bonnell, *First Moment of the Resurrection*,
Mixed media on grocery bag paper

In a tribute to Gibran after his death, one of his close friends wrote:

“Gibran was of those souls that experienced moments of utter clarity in which Truth delights to be mirrored. In that was Gibran’s glory.... Whoever knows not Gibran’s sorrows cannot know his joys. And whoever knows not his joys cannot know the power that made it possible for him to put his joys and sorrows in words that ring with melody, and in colors that stand out as living thoughts and longings, and lines that are ladders between the animal in the human heart and the God enthroned within that heart... In polishing the mirror of his soul he polishes the mirrors of our souls.”

This is what our *Dying Sorrow* exhibition is all about: Sorrow and Joy, Death and New Life. The exhibition echoes that juxtaposition in Jesus’ promise when he said; “In the world you will have trouble, but I have overcome the world.” This is why Bonnell’s final work in the exhibition, after 15 portrayals of the crucifixion and a Pieta depiction, is most fittingly titled, *“First Moment of the Resurrection.”*

I leave the last words to the artist Daniel Bonnell:

“To take pause this Holy Week and view the cross deeper enables us to be opened up to a greater depth of love that has no bottom. If we really see correctly, we are both the good and the bad thief on the cross. Just as the Father embraces his dying Son so are we embraced on both sides. At the very center of the scene is the completed symbol of love and forgiveness for you and me, as well as all of mankind. ‘For God so loved the whole world...’”

Note: To learn more about *Dying Sorrow* - oncaravan.org/dyingsorrow