

CAPTURING GOD

[RICO TICE]

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Capturing God

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*To George Tice,
my older brother and best man*



A PICTURE PAINTS

For me, it's the one with my dad and my family, on a golf course in February, grinning and squinting in 40mph winds.

Dad's in a wheelchair. And it's the last time he'll visit this golf course, where he'd taught me how to play (erratically) and which had for years been the main place where we shared time together while steadfastly refusing to give each other short putts. His smile speaks of good memories.

Lucy, my wife, is holding our two-month-old baby and smiling too. She's smiling in a way that suggests she's thinking, "Rico is mad". She's there because it means a lot to me, and her presence speaks of her affection for me.

My two older kids are smiling because, well, they've been told to. The fact that the boys listened is

remarkable. The fact that they are not actually looking at the camera is normal. (Why is it that children have an in-built tendency never to look at a camera?) Their expressions speak of that basic excitement about each day that young children seem to have.

And then there's me. I'm smiling, because there are three generations of Tices together and I can't quite believe I've managed to organise it, albeit in the midst of a gale. I'm scruffy because... well, I'm always scruffy (at the time, I thought I looked smart, but the camera never lies). My grin tells you a tale of a man who is scruffily content.

For me, that's the photo that captures my family. It's a mixture of memories and characteristics, of the place and the time and the moment. It's a picture I love to look at, because it somehow captures the essence of the Tices. It paints our characters; it sums us up. And when I look at it, it changes how I feel. It makes me smile.

Most of us have a photo like that of a loved one. It might be the person you married. Your best friend. A parent. Your kids. It might hang in your house or sit on a shelf or be tucked into a wallet or be the lockscreen on your smartphone. And you love it, because somehow it captures who that person is. And it makes you smile. It really changes how you feel.

You may not be particularly bothered about the Tice family or about a picture that sums us up. That's fair enough. But imagine being offered one photograph

that captured the essence of God. Imagine that God offered to hang in a frame an image that revealed everything that he wants to reveal about himself.

What would you expect to see? What would it be a picture of? Maybe you expect me to tell you about one of those Victorian paintings where a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus is chatting to some children. Or an old guy who looks a bit like your granddad, sitting on a throne. Or a bright white light and not much else. Or nothing at all.

But as you approach this frame, it contains none of those things. Instead what you see is... a barbarous execution.

This should sound bizarre—that this would be the way that God has chosen to reveal himself. That this could be the best way for God to tell you what he's like—to capture his character in a single scene.

Yet that's what the Christian message claims. And if you find that weird, you're ready to wrestle with it. If you find it normal, then let me say it again: the picture that best captures who God is is a picture of a man hanging on the most brutal instrument of torture and execution mankind has ever invented.

We're used to seeing that instrument, a cross, hanging in church buildings and round people's necks. But that's quite strange when you think about it. It's like putting an electric chair at the front of church services. The symbol at the heart of the Christian

faith is not a crib to remind people of its founder's birth. It's not a lamp to point to his teaching. It's not a stone to repeat the claim that he rose from the dead.

It's a cross, to point to his death. A cross, to reach back to the events of the first Good Friday.

No other world religion celebrates the death of its founder. Christianity focuses on it. Why? Why is this symbol of universal loathing a badge of honour for Christians?

Because this is the place that best captures God. And so this is the place that this book is about. Which means it won't be poetic or full of fun—as the poet W.H. Auden once wrote, “Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot”. It will surprise you. It should shock you. It may well offend you. But it might just thrill you and it might just change you, too.

For me, it's the picture with my dad and family, in the wind, on a golf course.

For God, it's the picture where a man was brutally murdered, in darkness, on a cross.

Will you look at it?

THE PICTURE

They say a picture paints a thousand words. A thousand words can paint a very good picture, too—and so, in this case, can precisely 823 words. So

here's the picture. It's taken from one of the four biographies of Jesus, or "Gospels", in the Bible. This one's written by a doctor and historian called Luke. As you read it, paint the picture in your head. Read it slowly, and pause to add the detail to the scene—the sights, the sounds, the shouts, the silences.

In the next few chapters, I'm going to focus on some of the details of the picture—but first, I need you to paint it in your mind. It's about AD 33. We open with the Roman governor of Judea, a province of the Roman Empire on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. He's in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, and he's calling together the local religious and political leaders of the conquered nation of Israel, along with a mob of ordinary residents, to announce his judgment on a man who they have accused of treason—a man named Jesus...

Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."

But the whole crowd shouted, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown

into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)

Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

For the third time he spoke to them: “Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him.”

But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then,

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*‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!”
and to the hills, “Cover us!”’*

*For if people do these things when the tree is green,
what will happen when it is dry?’*

And so we reach the moment, the single scene, the crucial image...

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from

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the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.

(Taken from the Bible, from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 23, verses 13 to 55)