
#6 – CONVERSATIONS



Christ in a Storm on the Sea of Galilee (1633)¹ by Rembrandt (1606-1669)², held in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

THE PAINTING

Matthew 8 (NJB): The Calming of the Storm ²³ Then he got into the boat followed by his disciples. ²⁴ Suddenly a storm broke over the lake, so violent that the boat was being swamped by the waves. But he was asleep. ²⁵ So they went to him and woke him saying, 'Save us, Lord, we are lost!' ²⁶ And he said to them, 'Why are you so frightened, you who have so little faith?' And then he stood up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. ²⁷ They were astounded and said, 'Whatever kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' ³

Let us look at the painting.

This painting is not about ideas; it is about affects (emotions, feelings) and what they drive the twelve Apostles to do or fail to do.

¹ To study and to zoom in on this painting:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d9/Rembrandt_Christ_in_the_Storm_on_the_Lake_of_GalileeFXD.jpg.

² *Grove Art Online* (Oxford) at "**Rembrandt** (Harmensz.) van Rijn (Leiden, 15 July 1606; Amsterdam, 4 October 1669) - Dutch painter, draughtsman and etcher. From 1632 onwards he signed his works with only the forename Rembrandt; in documents, however, he continued to sign Rembrandt van Rijn (occasionally van Rhyn), initially with the addition of the patronymic 'Harmensz.'. This was no doubt in imitation of the great Italians such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian, on whom he modelled himself, sometimes literally. He certainly equaled them in fame, and not only in his own country. His name still symbolizes a whole period of art history rightfully known as 'Holland's Golden Age'. ... Rembrandt was not only a gifted painter but also an inspired graphic artist: he has probably never been surpassed as an etcher, and he often seems inimitable as a draughtsman. His subjects reflect his manifold talent and interests. ... The 1630s are regarded as Rembrandt's most 'Baroque' period, with particular reference to his history paintings. Exceptional in both format and subject is the *Christ in a Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633; Isabella Stewart Gardner Mus., Boston, stolen 1990; Br. 547). Rembrandt never painted the marine views that were so popular in the northern Netherlands, and it was presumably the customer who requested this unusual subject and also dictated its enormous size. Houbraken praised the work for its convincing representation of **the frightened apostles**.

³ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 8:23-27.

Rembrandt leaves no doubt that the violence of the storm is considerable, and that no one in that boat should be capable of staying calm, capable of holding the intensity of his reactions in check. Then we zoom in, looking more carefully at each of the thirteen men in the boat. Much more is going on here.

The two in the front of the boat, even though they are not equal to the power of the storm, remain focused, continuing to work for the safety of the boat and of its passengers. We feel admiration for them. Their ability to “stay calm” is directly proportional to their *caring more* about offering their skill and even their lives because the situation demands it. This is important. They do not overcome their fear by trying to make themselves not fear; they master themselves *by caring more* about being equal to the moment and not failing to show up.

The two facing each other at the mainmast are all about self-preservation. One with his back to the waves, hiding from what scares him, clings to the mast; the other one not only has tied himself by the waist to the mast with a heavy rope but he also has thrown a heavy cloth around the mast so that both of his desperate hands can cling to it. Fear has overmastered these two; they are incapable of helping anyone, of noticing any need beyond themselves. Here we have a luminous example of the connection between a paralyzing fear ruling a person and his or her lack of love.

1 John 4 (NJB):

¹⁸ In love there is no room for fear,
but perfect love drives out fear,
because fear implies punishment
and no one who is afraid has not come to perfection in love.
¹⁹ Let us love, then,
because he first loved us. ⁴

The one with the knife in his belt, his right hand holding a fixed line (a stay), appears to be praying, looking up into the light that has broken through the threatening sky and has splashed over the front of the boat. One who so earnestly prays when the circumstances are desperate *is* doing something important. There is interior strength in that man. He is not working the sails or the oars; he is instead addressing the Lord of the storm and sea, the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ, “The Wreck of the Deutschland” (1875)⁵ –

⁴ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 1 Jn 4:18–19.

⁵ See: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44403/the-wreck-of-the-deutschland>.

Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones & veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

Then there are the four Apostles who have given up completely. One faces forward, frozen in resignation at his imminent death; there is another one standing behind him – the only one who is looking at us, as if we might be of help to him; then there is the one cowering at the gunnel on other side of the boat, trying to stay as far away from the storm as possible; and we notice that one is vomiting over the side of the boat. These four do nothing; help no one; they wish for a tamer world, for a less inconvenient reality.

Then we watch those two who are beseeching Jesus – “Save us, Lord! We are lost.” What strikes us is that they seem to be especially interested in the theological reasons why Jesus should be better in this circumstance than He is, needing to articulate those reasons to Jesus, who watches them with a bemused face. Listening to such theologians, Jesus might have wished that He had stayed asleep.

Finally, there is that Apostle at the rudder. He, like those two up front, meets the moment with resolve and courage, keeping the boat directly into the hammering waves. His strength and unwavering commitment to do his job goes unnoticed, except by Rembrandt who makes sure that we notice him.

What Rembrandt has painted is a biblical moment awash with and nearly capsized by the intensity and magnitude of the feelings of the Apostles ... and how those feelings cause each of them to respond. Notice that Rembrandt wants us to pay attention to this, which is why he did not paint what we might be especially interested in seeing: the moment when Jesus stood up and stilled the storm. No, he keeps us focused on the Apostles in *the time before* He stood up and acted.

TEXT (KNOX & OAKLEY)

6. ABOUT IMMODERATE PASSIONS

1. Once a man sets his heart on anything immoderately, he loses his peace of mind – the proud man, the avaricious man, how little peace they enjoy! It is the detached, the humble, that live wholly at rest. Strange, how easily a man can be attracted and overcome by some slight, some trumpery affection, if he is not yet utterly dead to self! He has no spiritual fibre; nature (you may say) is still strong in him; he has a bias towards the things of sense. And how should he detach himself altogether from worldly desires? Does he leave them ungratified? It is a constant source of irritation to him. Does anybody thwart them? He is ready to fly into a rage.

2. On the other hand, if he gives way to them and gets what he wants, all at once he is struck down by remorse of conscience; that is all that comes of yielding to passion – he is no nearer the peace of mind he aimed at. No, the heart can only find rest by resisting its passions, not by humouring them; heart's rest is for the fervent, the devout, not for the carnally minded, for those who give themselves over to the love of outward things.

CONVERSATION

Point One

Our author writes: "Once a person sets his or her heart on anything *immoderately*, he loses his peace of mind."

To "set one's heart on" is a poetic way of speaking about **strong (i.e., a set) desire**. But it is also a biblically insightful way of speaking when we recall how "the heart" was understood to be the organ of decision-making – a process involving both *thinking* and *feeling*.

HEART [לֵב *lev*; καρδία *kardia*]. Most of the inner organs of the human body - throat, nostrils, kidneys, entrails, and the heart - have specific symbolic meanings in the Bible. For example, the kidneys were considered the location of *conscience*, presumably because they are the part of the body that is likely to cause pain for someone with bad conscience. **Unlike Western cultures, which primarily associated the heart with feelings and emotions, Near Eastern culture emphasized its role in thinking, reasoning, and planning.** The heart characterizes humans first and foremost as "rational beings" that are susceptible to teaching and learning, as Deuteronomy 29:3 points out: "Yet to this day, Yahweh has not given you *a heart to understand*, or eyes to see, or ears to hear."

Just as every other part of the human nature has its perceptive function so, too, has the heart.⁶

We live in an American moment when too many of us have succumbed to the (demonic) temptation to allow our powers of soul to be *outsourced*! They are our greatest human powers. They are of **memory**/imagination; of intellect/**understanding**/reason; of **will**/affect. Such powers need to be trained, laid hold of, never surrendered to anyone for any reason.

Instead of training our power of memory to become stronger, more capacious,⁷ we don't bother, letting a search engine remember things for us. Instead of training our reason to be disciplined and of greater nimbleness and penetration, we are allowing AI – artificial intelligence⁸ – to do our thinking for us.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**immoderate**” – **1.a. – 1398** – Not moderate; exceeding usual or proper limits; excessive, extravagant, too great.

But here is the deal. The more we outsource our central human/soul powers, the more *vague* we become as persons, or we might say, the more *artificial*, and *dull*. And the vaguer we become, the more *immoderate* we inevitably will be, and the *louder*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**vague**” – **5. – 1822** – Lacking physical definiteness of form or outline; indistinctly seen or perceived; formless, obscure, shadowy. **6.a. – 1806** – Of persons, the mind, etc.: Unable to think with clearness or precision; indefinite or inexact in thought or statement.

Why? As a “solution” to our vagueness and boredom, we will seek *intensity of feelings*, needing constantly to nourish that intensity in order to feel that we are alive at all. Our author calls this state “losing one's peace of mind.” Or, as we might dryly offer, “we have lost our mind” or are “out of our mind.”

Point Two

⁶ Andreas Schuele, “[Heart](#),” in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 764.

⁷ “**capacious**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* – **2. – 1656** – Able to hold much; roomy, spacious, wide.

⁸ “**artificial intelligence**” – Have you ever stopped to consider how odd this expression is, and how revealing? The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**artificial**” – **1.1.a. – c1425** – Of a thing: made or constructed by human skill, esp. in imitation of, or as a substitute for, something which is made or occurs naturally; man-made.

Our author writes: “No, the heart can only find rest by resisting its passions, not by humoring them.”

The Confessions of St. Augustine famously begin: 1, 1. Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise;¹ your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning.² And so we humans, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you – we who carry our mortality about with us,³ carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud.⁴ Yet these humans, due part of your creation as they are, still do long to praise you. You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, **and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.**⁹

It is worth thinking here about the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). Have you noticed that the first eight commandments prohibit *actions* but that the ninth and tenth commandments¹⁰ prohibit a specific kind of *desire*?

Exodus 20 (NJB): ¹⁷ ‘You shall not **set your heart on** your neighbour’s house. You shall not **set your heart on** your neighbour’s spouse, or servant, man or woman, or ox, or donkey, or any of your neighbour’s possessions.’¹¹

A traditional way of translating the kind of desires/passions that are prohibited is by the English verb “**to covet**”, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this way: **3.a. - a1300** – “To desire culpably; to long for (what belongs to another). (The ordinary sense.)”

^{*1} See Pss 47:2(48:1); 95(96):4; 144(145):3.

^{*2} See Ps 146(147):5.

^{*3} See 2 Cor 4:10.

^{*4} See 1 Pt 5:5.

⁹ Saint Augustine, [*The Confessions, Part I*](#), ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, Second Edition., vol. 1 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 39.

¹⁰ “**Commandments 9 and 10**” – Roman Catholics have maintained that these are *two* commandments; others understand these two commandments as one commandment but with two parts.

¹¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ex 20:17.

These covetous desires, which our author says must be resisted, given no quarter, earnestly erased in us, are ones *that take us out of bounds* and in ways that are particularly destructive to human relationships.

When we let such covetous desires take hold of us, we are *culpable*; that is, we are *at fault*, because we freely indulged those desires. To indulge such desires, either in one's imagination or in actions, turns us, to use poetic language, into animals (which, frankly, is a deeply insulting thing to associate with animals). Perhaps better to say that those last two commandments of the Decalogue were given us by God to keep us from becoming *vampires*, as defined in this way:

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**vampire**” – 2.a. – 1741 – A person of a malignant and loathsome character, esp. one who preys ruthlessly upon others; a vile and cruel exactor or extortioner.

In short, as our author warns, “it is best not to humor these desires.”

Point Three

Our author writes: “On the other hand, if he or she gives way to them and gets what he or she wants, all at once he or she is struck down by remorse of conscience; that is all that comes of yielding to passion—he or she is no nearer the peace of mind he or she aimed at.”

You might exercise your memory and recall something that you *really* wanted. Can you recall an example?

I remember my 10-year-old self who had set my heart on a Crosman, pump-action, BB gun.¹² I knew that my parents were cautious about something that could “put my eye out”, and so likely they preferred me to moderate that strong desire. But to my surprise, and genuine delight, they worked with Santa that year to have one waiting for me under the tree.

But then this. For the first time in my life in specific relation to gifts given, I felt “let down”. How could this be?! I noticed that my strong desire (covetousness) for that BB gun had caused a greater vividness inside of me, and an intensity of feeling, that was greater than what I felt after I had received that beautiful, thoughtful gift from my parents. I was confused by this.

¹² They still exist! See: <https://www.crosman.com>.

Why was the feeling of *having* the gift less, less splendid and vivid, than was the feeling of *wanting* it, really wanting that BB gun?

Inchoately,¹³ I was beginning to recognize the significance of covetous desires, which cause a person *to feel empty inside* at the reception of a beautiful gift and to feel insincere in his or her response to the giver. *I felt wrongness in me.* "Thou shalt not covet, says the Lord."

Our author writes: "Once a person sets his or her heart on anything immoderately, he or she loses his or her peace of mind – the proud person, the avaricious person, how little peace they enjoy!"

¹³ "**inchoately**" – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective "**inchoate**": **a.** – **1534** – Just begun, incipient; in an initial or early stage; hence elementary, imperfect, undeveloped, immature.