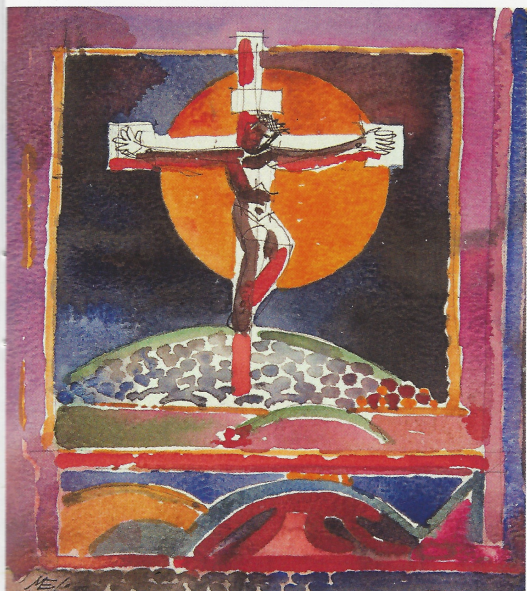


# Cosmic Christ

Sarah Middleton reflects on two creative responses to paintings depicting Christ's relationship to the natural world – at the cataclysmic point of his crucifixion.

What does the term 'cosmic Christ' mean to you? When Pam Stocker visited the Methodist Modern Art Collection's 2019 exhibition in Leicester Cathedral, she responded in poetry after finding inspiration in Theyre Lee Elliott's *Crucified tree form – the Agony*.

My own response was to a small painting by Michael Edmonds portraying the crucifixion. When Michael Edmonds died in 2014, his family offered this beautiful watercolour to the Collection's management committee in recognition of his close connection with the Collection over the years (his large mosaic work *The Cross over the City* was bought by Douglas Wollen for the Collection in 1963). Leading worship in churches around Cardiff, I have encountered a number of Edmonds' works *in situ*, and learnt of his enduring interest in geology, the local industry, and the well-being of miners – Edmonds himself was a 'Bevin Boy' in the South Wales coalfields during his Second World War service.



*The Crucifixion* by Michael Edmonds, watercolour on paper, 1988, 19.5 cm x 16.5 cm

## The Agony

Fused with Christ's body in shared agony this desecrated tree is stricken, scarred. Its limbs are splintered, severed, bound in barbed and twisted wire. Monochrome makes me see.

Black sinews strain, his empty face weeps wire, this Christ bleeds black against a yellow ground. His wounded side is bright, light shines behind his jagged crown, each thorn-spike tipped with fire.

The arms are broken that embraced the poor. The hands are bound that gave the hungry bread. No feet now walk where others scorned to tread. Love's truth and kindness, silenced, speak no more.

It's here I come, grace, hope, and joy all dead, to be restored, forgiven, comforted.

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Gazing at Edmonds' *The Crucifixion* in the light of this knowledge prompted a number of thoughts. Towards the lower border of the painting are black marks hinting at pieces of coal. Above them, the abstract shapes reflect a layered underground landscape with which the artist would have been familiar. The translucent jewel-like colours are arguably the most striking feature of this painting. These fiery tones, and the shapes of the disc



*Crucified tree form – the Agony* by Theyre Lee Elliott, tempera and gouache on paper, 1959, 85 cm x 65 cm.

and crucifix, are reminiscent of one of Edmonds' earlier works, an oil painting called *Bessemer* (1955) which depicts the smelting process inside a blast furnace. To me, the artist is expressing how a cosmic transformation happened when Christ died upon the cross. The potent orange sun against the dark hues of the sky evokes the mysterious midday solar phenomenon described by the gospel writers, and in Matthew 27: 51 we read also that the earth shook and the rocks were split.

As I write, there are changes happening in the natural world which cause many to question: are these the consequences of human behaviour or of divine action? How are the two inter-related? In the paradox of Pam Stocker's final couplet, we rely, at the foot of the cross, on Christ's mercy.

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