

Pentecost 13 – 14th Aug 16

Readings: Isaiah 5: 1-7; Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12: 49-59

A month or so ago Fr. Donald in a sermon said something an idea or vision that had come to him about street theatre.....well, he told me he was going to say that so I imagine he did. Theatre, of course is an art form and I'm going to pick up on the art theme and depart I guess from my normal practice of preaching on the readings and offer a few reflections on art and theology – especially the visual arts. I often walk out the front door and look across at the Art Gallery – not that I've been into it yet. And I'm well aware that part of the gallery now used to be the Church of England Men's Society Hall that was built by this parish, so there's a kind of a link. A significant event of the parish is the Annual Quilt and Craft Exhibition – a celebration of a particular form of art – or is it craft? A while ago now I dropped into the Support Centre here for a chat and the subject of public art space came up and how great it would be if the parish could make some link with the community and passers-by in D'Arcy Doyle Place by having a public art space visible and available on some of our property. I imagine many of you have heard of the Blake Prize for Religious Arts which encourages artists to explore spirituality, religion and human justice

A while ago now I was interstate visiting a friend who is a priest. While Libbie and his wife were out doing MU things one morning, we talked about books we were reading. He loaned me a book called *Mere Theology* by Alister McGrath¹ You may recognise a similarity in the title to a famous book by C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, and McGrath admits he has “shamelessly borrowed and adapted”² his title from C.S. Lewis.

As I started to read the book in the plane on the way home, I began to notice the number of artistic words I was reading; some examples “the tapestry of faith”, “the theatre of the glory of God”, a “rich landscape”. And as I read a little further, I found these few lines: *“Studying theology is like a voyage of discovery: we find spectacular new vistas opening up for us. But as we become more and more familiar with the great ideas, words and images of faith, there is a danger we will begin to take them for granted. Part of our theological journeying will be to keep them fresh and alive. We must.....ask ourselves: what is there about these ideas and images that could transform the outlook of someone who knows nothing about the life of faith?”*³ And I began to think that the author could well be describing great art which can take us on a voyage of discovery, open up spectacular new vistas for us, and convey ideas and images in a special way which can sometimes transform the way we look at things.

He goes on to write...and I promise there is only one more very short quote....”*Christian faith is about far more than making sense of this world; it is about holding out the hope of something better – a new creation, and the New Jerusalem. Theology does not merely help us appreciate the landscape of faith in this world. It gives us a vision of another landscape over the horizon, a new world that is yet to be born, and assures us that we shall be part of it. Mere theology is about sustaining the Christian hope for the future, not just fostering Christian understanding in the present. Like Moses, we can climb the mountain to see over the river to the Promised Land where one day we shall dwell.*

¹ Alister McGrath *Mere Theology* SPCK London 2010

² Ibid vii

³ Ibid p24

*Theology helps us see this world in its proper perspective.*⁴ The passage is full of “art” words. I think art can be about far more than making sense of the immediate and now – it appeals to our imaginations and helps give us other visions and other perspectives as we are drawn into it.

I remember the flight home. It was in the late afternoon and I was on the western side of the aeroplane. It was a beautifully clear sky about with clouds gathering on the horizon. The sun began to set and I was amazed and taken into absolute delight at the vision that developed before me. The reds and crimsons of the sunset became deeper as did the silhouette of the clouds in front of the sun. The whole landscape was bathed in this mysterious light and all the small lakes and farm dams and water in the rivers began to glisten as far as the eye could see. It was just majestic and beautiful and stunning – but how can I adequately describe it to you? Words aren’t good enough to express our real experiences sometimes. They can perhaps describe some aspect – in this case of the sunset from the aeroplane – but how can they really describe my emotional reaction, informed by my own faith which saw in this something of the wonder and grandeur and mystery of God. But that’s my reaction – and a subjective one at that. Artists could convey something more, something deeper, I’m sure. But as they didn’t see what I saw, whatever they were to produce would be their interpretation. If everyone on the aeroplane were able to see the sunset, we would see the same view but if we were able to talk about it afterwards, it would become clear that everyone had noticed things that someone else may have missed – a particular cloud shape, or something highlighted by a shaft of light. A kind of corporate view would emerge which would be far more comprehensive than my individual account. Artists sometimes approach this by painting the same scene in different lights. For example, the French impressionist painter Claude Monet worked a series of some 25 paintings in his “Haystacks” series. The series depicted the same haystacks in a field near his home with differences in perception of light across various times of day, seasons, and types of weather. In the same way we need theology to give a comprehensive, many faceted view of our faith from different perspectives rather than being limited to one individual’s often subjective perception of things. This is, in a very real sense, behind what we do in home groups or studies like “Pilgrim”. The authors may present a view as we read a piece of scripture – but as we invite people to identify or comment on a particular word or phrase that meant something to them – we begin to build up a picture of the passage and what it might be revealing to us about God from different perspectives.

But theology can develop a bad reputation if it retreats into an ivory tower and becomes simply an intellectual pursuit. Sure, we’re urged to love God with our minds, but with our hearts and souls as well. The defence of the intellectual credibility of Christianity has become much more important recently with the rise of what’s termed the new atheism popularised by people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and taken up unquestioningly by sections of the media – although there’s nothing new about it. And indeed Peter in his first letter urges the readers to “always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you”.⁵ But theology divorced from worship can become empty and intellectual. Worship helps us perceive through the words the majesty and glory of God. It reminds us of the greater and deeper reality behind the ideas and language that theology can become too concerned with getting right. Joyful worship can correct stale theology. By the same token, theology can correct worship that becomes

⁴ Ibid p26

⁵ 1 Peter 3:15

too subjective. *“Worship is not improved by whipping up the emotions or turning up the music, rather it is enhanced and authenticated by reflecting on who God is”*⁶ (That’s the last quote) Theology helps us reflect on who God is.

I think there are parallels in the world of art – we can simply look on or at the surface of a piece of art and think or say “that’s nice” or “I don’t like that”. That’s seeing the work as an object of interest (or lack of interest) in itself. Or we can allow ourselves to be drawn deeper into it, to look or imagine what’s beyond the surface and gain access to a deeper reality which the artist is trying to express.

George Herbert, the 17th century poet and priest wrote a hymn called “Teach me my God and King”. You’ll find it in AHB – it didn’t make it into TIS. In one verse it says: “A man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye: Or if he pleaseth through it pass, And then the heav’n espy” The magnificent Millenium Window at our Cathedral is like that or you may well have seen other magnificent stained glass windows in other places here or overseas. If we look just on the surface, we’ll see just coloured glass, but if we choose to allow ourselves to be drawn through and beyond it, the glass becomes a means of gaining access to something much deeper – perhaps a glimpse of the majesty and glory of God.

So I think it’s terrific that sometimes we can celebrate and give thanks for gifts of art and creativity. People with these gifts help us express ideas and feelings we find difficult to express by other means. They help us see things in a different way that transcends just looking or observing. In the same way theology helps us to see things in a different way, throwing open the shutters on a world that cannot be known, experienced or encountered through human wisdom alone. It’s like a prism or window through which we can look to see our world in a new way and discern the transcendence of God in the everyday and heaven in the ordinary.⁷

⁶ Alister McGrath *Mere Theology* SPCK London 2010 p26

⁷ *Ibid* p38