

November 2013 Space for Grace

'Out beyond right and wrong, there's a field. I'll meet you there'

Being claustrophobic, November is not my favourite month. It is when my nightmares are most vivid, as I panic in small, dark tunnels, filled with an unbearable terror. And always, when travelling, anxiety grips me whenever I cannot get the aisle seat, the seat near the emergency exit, the seat nearest the door. I love spaces, vast expanses, unending horizons, seascapes and big windows.



There is a huge, flat field within a couple of miles of my home. It stretches for miles in all directions. I spoke to the farmer. He said it was designated on the flight-path map of pilots as a good place for an emergency landing. For the doomed descending, the field of space becomes the field of grace. I mention this huge, open field only because I love to stand in the middle of it – a place without limitations. I cannot wait to see the pure evenness of it when the sky covers it with snow. Because space is not a vacuum. More like an invitation to the imagination, a formless womb for holding mystery.

I remember a conversation I had with Vincente, the architect who built the most beautiful Church of St Benedict in East Leeds some years ago. Behind the altar and the presidential chair we created a huge, totally empty wall. Parishioners thought we had forgotten something. Everyone wanted to pin a meaning on it – a figure, a banner, a text, a cross. Vincente talked to us about the potential for worship in the concept of space; about creating a building in which all that was unnecessary was excluded; about simplifying a church so that the emptiness could be made meaningful only by the infinite. The invisible as the strongest presence of all.

Karl Rahner wrote:

'There is no such thing, either in the world or in the heart, as literal vacancy, as a vacuum. And wherever space is really left by death, by renunciation, by parting, by apparent emptiness, provided the emptiness that cannot remain empty is not filled by the world, or activity, or chatter, or the deadly grief of the world – there is God.'

Thomas More, author of *Care of the Soul*, has written about the concept of *temenos*. He describes it as the holding of a certain area as a special or sacred precinct. It is where room, not necessarily geographical, is kept for the holy, the enchanted. For the Greeks of the past, *temenos* was the spiritual area for what lies beyond the functional and the immediate. This sacred space was not to be filled, used or polluted in any way. Its sole reason was to protect a meeting of spirits, to be a threshold into another world of a more profound reality. The work of liturgy in particular, he writes, needs its unique *temenos* so as to be effective and transformative.

In the new St Benedict's Church we also left lots of room around the altar – for dancing. Space loves to be danced in. In his book *The Empty Space* the renowned theatre director Peter Brook writes about that creative space which is the prerequisite for action. Every performance, whether music, dance or drama, is a kind of prayer, born out of silence and space. Reflecting on the Irish passion for setdancing with its exhilarating little jumps and turns, its circling and bowing beneath another couple's arms into new free



Every writer too must face the blank page. Paradoxically, the more economical he or she is in the filling of that page, the more powerful the writing and the greater his or her ability to speak to the human heart. John McGahern, one of Ireland's finest writers of spare, beautiful prose, said that the best writing is about suggestion, not statement.

I sent a poem of mine to Michael McCarthy, a priest-poet friend, for comment. 'It suffers,' he replied, 'from its desire to express itself totally. The first thing about poetry is that everything does not have to be said. Its discipline has to do with understatement and evocation.'

In Henry James, R. S. Thomas, the Celtic poet of God's darkness, writes about 'the eloquence of the unsaid thing, the nobility of the deed not performed, the significance of an absence'.

When it comes to understanding the essence of the Gracious Mystery, silent space and empty nothingness have long been at the heart of the church's apophatic tradition – a non-negotiable reminder that all our descriptions of God will forever be well wide of the mark. The Being called Love can never be confined in small images, in small liturgies, in small churches. We are always tempted to lock God away in windowless places with low ceilings and high security; to pinpoint the divine presence with fallible compasses and dogmatic navigation systems. The Spirit of God will always need space to blow and dance where she will.

There are two such inner spaces for grace that I am learning to treasure. One has to do with the tiny but eternal space we make room for, when we hold off, even for a split second, the negative – even violent – reaction to a sudden hurt, allowing into our souls a sliver of saving light. In that tiny oasis we recover our almost-lost balance and centre, our precarious peace. It lasts the space of a breath – but hides a heaven. The other subtle space is equally soul-saving. It is the space we move to, to stop the deadly habit of judging

everyone and everything – a common and destructive habit. This place of grace, rarely visited because it remains uncharted in the doctrinal maps of our salvation, is where we, too, hold before us Christ's compassionate understanding of the complexity of our lives.

Out beyond right and wrong there's a field,' wrote Rumi. 'I'll meet you there.'



Only when we sink into the thought-less, sense-less, imageless space of contemplation, when we surrender, in great and graced trust, to the emptiness and nothingness of the void we call God, will we ever even begin to get a glimpse of God at work in both of these moments.

There is an unforgettable humility and respect in R. S. Thomas' Via Negativa:

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in the hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness between stars.

