

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 17th October - BEAUTY AND THE PRIEST

It was a dark, eerie Friday afternoon at the end of March. The children were racing from our local school to the waiting bus. Suddenly a girl noticed the magnificent rainbow. There it was, an arc of beauty, elegant as a ballet-dancer, stretching gracefully across the blood-shot sky of our small city. Fine-tuned as they were to the play of light and shade, to the dance of colours, from their Lenten class-preparation for the Feast of Brightness, their young eyes missed nothing in that ring of wonder that hung like a silent blessing almost within reach of their small hands.

Their teacher joined them. I knew what she was thinking. Would she talk about God, about Easter, about a prayer of thanks? She didn't. Instinctively she knew that the still surprise of the children was already an act of worship - there was nothing more, just then, to add. To experience that tiny theophany was in itself to adore. And maybe that timeless moment had more to do with the transformation of our universe than we will ever know. "It is only beauty," said Simone Weil, "that will save the world. Beauty is a sacrament; it is Christ's tender smile coming through."

The vocation of the priest is to be a prophet of beauty, to remind people of the light within them; to reassure them that they are, as Thomas Merton realized in his moment of intense disclosure in a city street, 'shining like the sun'; to tell them, that they, like those school-children, can almost touch a rainbow. The calling of the priest, like it was for Jesus before him, and like it is for the Church and her sacraments now, is not to introduce something new to God's creation, but to reveal, purify and intensify what is already there. I recently read *Years of Wonder* by Geraldine Brooks.

It was the time of the 17th century Great Plague in Eyam, Derbyshire. The small community heroically decided to close off all contact with the outside world so as to contain the deadly disease within their village. Most of them died horrible deaths. Towards the end of these fateful months, Mrs Mompellion, the vicar's wife, despite her illness, whispers these words of hope to her distraught, despairing and hopeless helper, Anna. "I wonder if you know how you have changed. It is the one good to have come out of this terrible year. Oh yes, Anna, the spark was clear in you when you first came to me – but you covered your light, afraid of what would happen if anyone saw it. You were like a flame blown by the wind until it is almost gone. All I had to do was to put the glass round you. And now, oh how you shine!"

At the splintered threshold-moments of their lives the priest puts the glass around the fragile hearts of his people. And strange as it may seem, he may well have to walk across the broken glass of his own shattered vows before he can do this with a new innocence (pace R.S.Thomas). He knows that if he is ever to name, protect and reveal the mysterious place of beauty in others, he himself must first, like Anna, be broken and then put together again by loving hearts.

Irenaeus was talking about beauty when he said that the glory of God was the fully-alive human being. So was St. Paul when he reminds us that "our unveiled faces reflect like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, growing brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect." And in the most wonderful words, Thomas Aquinas assures us that "God is beauty itself, beautifying all things. God puts into creatures a kind of sheen, a reflection of God's own luminous ray, which is the fountain of all light."

A few years ago, our parishioners organized "A Day of Beauty" on the Sunday of the Transfiguration. We sent posters to other churches, put them in shop-windows, placed news-items in the local papers. It turned out to be a day of tears and smiles, of memories and dreams. Everything about that day was special, and all who came with their own creations of what was beautiful, were pampered and spoiled and made to feel unique. Moira wrote to us afterwards. "Bodies danced our yearning to reach God, and lovely stories led us

into the invitation of the day – to recognize and trust the beauty in ourselves, awakened by the call of beauty from others. I felt my heart grow bigger, pushed outwards, full of thankfulness and wonder at this vision of what life can be like – much as I imagine James, John and Peter felt on the mountain that day.”

Few things in life have the compelling power of beauty. Beauty beckons us once we have recognised it. It points beyond itself. We know it is a sacrament of God because that is what the beautiful humanity of Jesus is. Beauty awakens us to our mystery and transforms us more deeply into it. It tells us our name and names our horizons. For beauty we are born. By beauty we are nourished. Without it we decay. Our seeds of beauty may sleep through many a winter, but they never die. Ronald Rolheiser reminds us that taking care of those seeds is priestly work.

“At the deepest level of our being, we already know beauty and resonate sympathetically with it because we are ourselves beautiful. In the depth of our souls we carry an icon of the One who is Beautiful. We have within us the image and likeness of God, the source of all beauty. That ‘Imago Dei’, that deep virginal spot within us, that place where hands infinitely more gentle than our own once caressed us before we were born, where our souls were kissed before birth, where all that is most precious in us still dwells, where the fire of love still burns, and where ultimately we judge everything as to its love and truth - in that place we feel a ‘vibration sympathetique’ in the face of beauty. It stirs the soul where it is most tender.”

In *The Colour Purple* Shug reminds us how fed-up God must be when we walk through a field of poppies and fail to notice the colour purple. Rabbi Lionel Blue refers to an admonition in the Talmud. On the final Judgement Day we shall be called to account for all the beautiful things we should have enjoyed - and didn't. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh explains why a parish priest worried about the spirituality of his new curate. The younger man was never afraid when the sun opened a flower. Because sin is blind to beauty. It is grey, has no imagination and misses the purple.

Every priest is called to be a sacrament of the mystical, a reminder for people of their divine loveliness. There is a beautiful way of celebrating Eucharist, of preaching the Word, of being present to the hurting, of embracing sinners, of dancing with the limping on this precious Earth. The people will then believe that by their very presence, every word and every meal they share becomes a small but vibrant sacrament of God's beauty, warming people's hearts when they grow too cold, and bringing the morning early, when the nights are too dark and too slow. And that's when people will start going to Mass again.

If birthdays, anniversaries and sacred moments are celebrated in heaven, if ever the Lord of Life takes to the floor as Lord of the Dance, it must surely be at such poignant incarnations on this earth, of the everlasting beauty of our Tremendous Lover. Because, in the first instance, that is why the Word became flesh in Jesus.

(Tablet article)