

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 7th November

The Darkness between Stars.

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. I sweat when I'm cornered, when 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 mile of the presbytery where I now live. 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. I mention it 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. 'Out beyond right and wrong,' wrote Rumi, 'there's a field. I'll meet you there.'

... I wonder why space and emptiness are almost always seen as loss, as missed opportunity, as the unknown in need of labelling. Yet nothing much can ever happen without them. Rather are they the necessary conditions and context for imagination and understanding. Without the blank margins on this page, or the spaces between the letters of each word, you could not read it. Without the small silences between the notes, we would never hear a melody. Space is not a vacuum. Dark space, like mystery, is where the tomb becomes the womb, where the light is let in.

I remembered a conversation I had with Vincente, the architect who built our most beautiful Church of St Benedict in East Leeds a few years ago. Behind the altar and the presidential chair we created a huge, totally empty wall. Parishioners thought we had forgotten something. Every one wanted to pin a meaning on it – a figure, a banner, a text, a cross. Vincente talked to me 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 has the strongest presence of all.

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 transformative and grace-filled.

As well as the empty wall, we left lots of room around the altar – for dancing. Space loves to be danced in. In his book called *The Empty Space* the famous theatre director Peter Brook writes about that creative space which is the pre-requisite for action. Modern theatre has its roots in man's earliest rituals. Every performance, whether music, dance or drama, is a kind of prayer, born out of silence and space. Reflecting on the Irish passion for set-dancing with its exhilarating little jumps and turns, its circling and bowing beneath another couple's arms into new free space, to face the next row of dancers, Miceal O'Siadhail, in *A Fragile City*, remembers 'a scent of dizziness' followed by,

*Openness. Again and again to realign
Another face and the moves must begin
Anew. And we unfold into our design.
I want to dance forever. A veil
Shakes between now-ness and infinity.
Touch of hands. Communal and frail.
Our courtesies weave a fragile city.*

Every writer too must face the blank page. And paradoxically, the more economical he is in the filling of that page, the more powerful the writing and the greater his ability to speak to and move the human heart. John McGahern, one of Ireland's finest writers of spare, beautiful prose, who sadly passed away recently, said that the best writing is about suggestion, not statement.

Mick McCarthy's letter . . . Love's essence, like the poem's springs/from the not saying everything.

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';

*After the curtains deliberately
Kept drawn, his phrases were servants moving
Silently about the great house of his prose
Letting in sunlight into the empty rooms.*

Around that Lenten time I embarked on an exercise called Retreat on the Street. In the contrived pursuit of the experience of powerlessness in a big city, we were stripped of every possible escape route such as credit cards, mobile phones and loose change, apart from the 50p that we were expected to live on. After hours of pointless and powerless drifting around the freezing, threatening streets, I found myself shocked into surrendering to the inevitable, a place where control and influence held no sway. It felt like a falling into space, a sinking into a yawning pit of nothingness.

It was later I remembered some words of Karl Rahner: '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.'

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 Gracious Mystery can never be confined in small places, in small images, in small liturgies. We are always tempted to lock God away in windowless tabernacles 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.

Maybe something here of hope and promise for an emptying church. *Creatio ex nihilo*.
Space, emptiness as the birthplace of creativity and imagination. (Furrow. JO'D Sept. '06)

In his *Via Negativa* R.S. Thomas attempts to reveal the mystery in absence and in emptiness:

*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.*

The Prophet.

Only when we sink into the thought-less, sense-less, image-less space of contemplation, when we surrender to the emptiness and nothingness of the void we call God, will we ever even begin to get a glimpse of the infinite mystery and, maybe, a reason for the spaces that are opening up in our churches.

(Tablet article)