

Eastertide 2011

Week 4 - Beauty and the priest

We ache for beauty. For beauty we are created. It is the sacrament of God.

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 bloodshot 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's only beauty', said Simone Weil, 'that will change the world.'

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 realised in his moment of intense disclosure in a city street, 'shining like the sun'; to tell them, that they, like those schoolchildren, 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.

*From 'Already Within, Divining the Hidden Spring', p99*