

### 1. More than Words – the Power of Art

Matthew Arnold (19th Century) wrote: 'More and more humanity will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.'

'The poet or the novelist who can find the words and images that speak to our human condition – to our loneliness and pain, our potential to inspire or destroy, our mystery and our silent music – in such a way as to illuminate and extend our experience and perceptions, is the one who uses language as the sacramental vessel of grace. For just occasionally they strike a note which resonates deeply in us with an authenticity we cannot wholly analyse or explain.'

Traditionally, Western Christian theology has been predominantly concerned with the understanding of God through conceptual and rational terms. Rational thought and concepts are vital in our attempts to come to an understanding of God, but a purely verbally based theology is an impoverished one . . . All human beings have deep within them a non-rational, non-verbal awareness of the mystery called God, and it is through the arts, and other modes, that it may be experienced and perhaps partially understood and expressed.

All true artists strive to express that which is deep within the human person, be it called truth, goodness, beauty or meaning of life. A genuine work of art – the poem, the film, the dance, the music - has the power to evoke in people feelings of awareness of the Holy that are innate in everyone. At this precise moment we are lifted out of ourselves, time seems to stand still and we seem to be at one with everything. In this non-rational instant of knowing, our normal intellectual and emotional responses are suspended.

For a religiously orientated person, this passing experience of wonder conveys something of divine immanence, and its beauty is seen as a reflection of the ultimate beauty that is God. Art has the task of exposing 'the truth behind and within the ordinary'. It creates a doorway to a religious experience, to a dim reflection of the holy, a heightened awareness of God's presence in the world. It contains a new understanding, a brief moment of intense seeing, and of becoming part of that experience.

John Paul II states in his 'Letter to Artists' that 'every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of humanity and the world. This reality is God. The world we live in needs such beauty in order not to rush into despair . . . It is beauty, like truth, which makes the invisible world palpable, and brings joy to the human heart'. It takes us beyond who we are. Richard Rohr writes of a new way of knowing, beyond dualistic thinking. He calls it 'wisdom-seeing' . . .

It is an almost forgotten revelation – that God is revealed and experienced within the vital world of our senses and our daily lives, in everything that can be called human, in the heart of creation itself.

When we realise that all our experiences are the experiences of God within us, that all our human stories are divine stories too, that these moments in our lives are about the only place that God can be encountered and experienced, we realise that they, too, are real Gospel stories – the real Body of Christ.