

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 8th July: Your true human presence is where God's incarnate presence is disclosed

'Beauty, which in the East is one of the best loved names expressing divine harmony and transfigured humanity, appears everywhere – in lights and sounds and colours and scents'. For Christians all the creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word, planting in them a seed of definitive transformation ... bodiliness is considered in all its value in the liturgical act whereby the human body is disclosed in its inner nature as a temple of the Holy Spirit ...' (Pope St John Paul II) [LS 235]

Again, notice the rich rapture and sublime depth of the words here. Images and evocative phrases pile up. So many profound dimensions of spirituality are packed into one paragraph – the notion of beauty, of God's seed in everything, of the divinity of the human body, of the wonder of the Word made Flesh. For a start, the Pope, by quoting Pope St John Paul II, is suggesting that we need to recover the notion of beauty. Why? Because few things have the compelling power of beauty in all its million shapes and forms. It beckons to us, and 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 own mystery, made as we are in God's image, and transforms us more deeply into it. For beauty we are born. By beauty we are nourished. From beauty we came. In an article entitled 'The Transforming Power of Beauty' Ronald Rolheiser reminds us that, being fashioned from the 'Imago Dei', we already know beauty and carry it within us. He refers to '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 – in that place we feel a vibration sympathique in the face of true beauty. It stirs the soul where it is most tender.' (25 June 1999)

In our essential experience of beauty we are touching the heart of God. This is a moment of a sense of heaven. The soul of the whole world, from its very beginning, is kept vibrantly alive by the pulse of beauty. In that sense, whether we know it or not, whether we are religious or not, we are, the Christian would say, living in the heart of God, 'taken up into it' (EG 178). In the appreciation, wonder, sharing and experience of what is truly beautiful, no one is excluded. All become one in the community of beauty. No one has the special pass, or code for club membership. This is probably what Pope Francis is saying about beauty. In believers' terms, against the backdrop of the Incarnation, does it ever make sense to talk about 'secular' beauty, about the 'secular world of the arts', about a 'godless world', about 'merely human' beauty? Where true beauty is, God is. Since the Incarnation there are not two levels of beauty. So, for instance, a community may be Churchless, religion-less too, but not 'Godless' or 'beauty-less'.

In *Waiting on God* Simone Weil wrote the wonderfully succinct sentence, 'Like a sacrament, the beauty of the world is Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter.' Always drawn towards God, we carry an unconscious attraction towards becoming a 'small reflection', as St Paul put it, of that beautiful smile. 'We do not only want to see beauty,' wrote C. S. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*, 'we want something else that can hardly be put into words – to unite with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.' In a previous Letter Pope Francis wrote about 'teaching something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy in the midst of difficulties. Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with God ... [therefore] we must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the Word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings ...' (EG 167)

The human body is a mirror where the secret world of the soul comes to expression. It is a sacred threshold, 'the temple of the Holy Spirit' referred to in baptism. The sensuous is sacred, the body is truthful. The mind may deceive you; the body cannot. It is your safest home all your life – and God's home too. There is a false dualism between body and mind. They are as one. The soul is not hidden within the body; your body is in your soul and both will live on in heaven.

(An Astonishing Secret pp186-188)