

## Week Beginning 25th May 2014 - Grace and Radiance

Across the ward, a man is struggling. His body is writhing on the chair near the bed. His right leg, arthritic and misshapen, is kicking against the cubicle curtain. Sweat edges down the furrows of his grim face. I want to help him but I myself am anxiously recuperating. Taut and strained with the intense effort, he makes one last concentrated twist. And before a passing nurse can assist him, he utters a hoarse growl of triumph. The battle is over. Calm now, he proudly begins the long and complicated manoeuvre of buttoning up his cardigan – the cardigan that Dan had just managed to put on.

Why do I still remember Dan's small victory when I have already forgotten the world records of the recent Olympic champions? It has to do, I think, with a certain simplicity, a concentration, a determination on Dan's part. It was neither contrived nor attention-seeking. It was utterly honest; it was total and it was real. It was, I now believe, beautiful.

Here, according to D.H. Lawrence, was a man 'in his wholeness wholly attending'. There was no distraction in Dan's single eye as he battled with his uncooperative cardigan. If beauty is 'the product of honest attention to the particular' then I was privy to a small epiphany in a Tralee hospital that August morning. Did it, I wonder, somehow facilitate my own healing as I watched? And did an invisible healing grace dance through the ward at that moment? I do not know.

But what did dance through the hospital the following day, though not down our wing, was the newly crowned Australian 'Rose of Tralee'. There was no denying the grace and beauty there. But not only there, shining as it was. The mystic in all of us will recognise the hidden shimmering at the core of everything, even the imperfect; the quiet music in all that happens, the world itself as sacramental . . . That is why true beauty is always redemptive . . .

In *Waiting on God*, the French religious thinker Simone Weil wrote: 'Like a sacrament, the beauty of the world is Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter.' Drawn towards God, as we always somehow are from birth and baptism, we carry an unconscious attraction towards becoming small reflections of that beautiful smile. 'We do not merely 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.'

But why is this desire so faint within us? Because of a condition called spiritual blindness. In Alice Walker's novel *The Colour Purple*, Shug Avery reminds us how fed up God must feel when we walk through a field of poppies and fail to notice the colour purple. On the final Judgement day, Rabbi Lionel Blue tells us, we shall be called to account for all the beautiful things we should have enjoyed, but didn't. Sin is blind to beauty. It lives in a flat world, it fears the edges, it does not notice colour. It is graceless. And it is graceless because it has no imagination.

'The imagination,' wrote the Irish poet and priest John O'Donohue, 'creates a pathway of reverence for the visitations of beauty. To awaken the imagination is to retrieve, reclaim and reenter experience in fresh new ways . . .

My cousin, the poet Eugene O'Connell, writes about a beauty that took many decades to perfect. In 'Crossing the fire', he wrote about my auntie Nell and her husband, Johnnie:

... So when Johnnie died we wanted  
Nell to sit on his side of the fire,  
Out of the way of the draught and  
The traffic up to their room.  
But she kept to the habit of  
their life together, and preferred  
The visitor to sit on his chair.  
Afraid that if she crossed the fire  
That there would be no one  
On the other side to return her gaze.

(*Treasured and Transformed*, pp 99-102)