

2. Week Beginning 14th September 2014 Revealing the Essence – The Gift of the Artist

Philosopher Merleau-Ponty believed that the most profound artists may have something to say about the grace, in which, according to the Christian tradition, the whole of reality is suspended, sustained, 'as a singer sustains her song, but which it requires revelation to become aware of – to see'. The angel has to come to stir the water before we can wake to incarnation, to put fire to the stubble so as to glimpse the infinite horizon. . . .

Cézanne became a regular church-goer towards the end of his life. He did not attempt religious themes in his paintings. He concentrated upon landscape and still life. Yet through his delight in the colour and shapes of the world, he delights also in God. For the Russian painter Kandinsky, Cézanne saw the inner life in everything, and believed that colours came from the roots of the world – he tried to find colours for grace. Van Gogh said he could not look at a picture by Rembrandt without believing in God.

While much has been written about the gift of beauty provided by the vision and work of artists such as Turner and Monet, their contribution has been more profoundly described as their cleansing of 'the doors of perception'. . . .

'Art', says Rowan Williams in his *Grace and Necessity*, 'in one sense dispossesses us of our habitual perception and restores a reality, a dimension that necessarily escapes our conceptuality and our control. It makes the world strange.' . . .

It is not by holy additions to 'secular' art that the numinous is expressed; it is by one's understanding of the secular in the first place. . . .

The various faces and interpretations of reality in the work of an artist, are, for the Christian, privileged windows into the beyond and the within, incarnate epiphanies of the divine. Secular parables then, auditory and visible ones, are part of God's revelation. They are this without losing their secular character or undergoing any inner transformation. 'The aim of the artist', writes Flannery O'Connor, 'is to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe . . . The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality'.

There is a very neglected theology of nature and grace, of a sacramental vision, of 'the catholic imagination' that provides a wonderful context for all we have been considering. It is orthodox, traditional, mystical and espoused by theologians from the very beginning, and is once again making a welcome and timely appearance. The artist may or may not be a religious believer. From an artistic point of view that does not affect the spirituality of the created work. What does matter is a kind of ruthless authenticity and truthfulness, what Bishop Richard Harries calls a 'fundamental seriousness, a fierce artistic integrity'. Without this it will be impossible to find the beauty in the damaged, the truth in the twisted, the invisible in the visible, the grace in everything.

(*Treasured and Transformed* pp 167, 168, 169, 171)