

2012

Week 5 - Beauty and the Priest

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

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 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.

I recently read 'Years of Wonder' by Geraldine Brooks. It was the time of the seventeenth-century Great Plague in Eyam, Derbyshire. The small community heroically decided to close off all contact with the outside world so as to contain the deadly disease within their village. Most of them died horrible deaths. Towards the end of these fateful moments, Mrs Mompellion, the vicar's wife, despite her illness whispers these words of hope to her distraught, despairing helper, Anna: 'I wonder if you know how you have changed. It is the one good to have come out of this terrible year. Oh yes, Anna, the spark was clear in you when you first came to me – but you covered your light, afraid of what would happen if anyone saw it. You were like a flame blown by the wind until it is almost gone. All I had to do was to put the glass around you . And now, Oh how you shine!'

At the splintered threshold-moments of their lives, the priest puts the glass around the fragile hearts of his people. And strange as it may seem, he may well have to walk across the broken glass of his own shattered vows before he can do this with a new innocence. He knows that if he is ever to name, protect and reveal the mysterious place of beauty in others, he himself must first, like Anna, be broken, and then put together again by loving hearts.

(From Already Within: pp 99,100)