

Warwick International Festival



A Sermon Preached at St Mary's Warwick
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Feast of SS Peter & Paul
29/6/08

Acts 12:1-11
Matthew 16:13-19

+In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A student wrote an essay for me only a short while ago on the subject of theology and the arts. She took a rather severe line, I thought, about the role that the arts might play in the business of *being human* – and, more than that, being human *well*. Although forms of artistic expression can be illuminating and can give us pleasure, she argued, they weren't part of the original goodness of humanity in Eden, and they wouldn't be part of that final, restored, perfected life of humanity which is Paradise. For her, the arts are part of our present world of imperfection – of imperfect mediations of truth, goodness and beauty (as opposed to the life of heaven, which is direct knowledge of God). The arts are part of the world which has fragmented into indirectness and ambiguity, into multiple and partial meanings; the world in which we look through a glass darkly, and only ever get glimpses (at best) of what is ultimate and singular and perfect. For my student, the arts seemed to be features of a fallen world; products of the Fall.

I do not agree with this – although there is no doubt at all that there is bad art, that art can seduce and distract and mislead us, delude us and tell us lies – that it can make us decadently preoccupied with the merely 'aesthetic' at the expense of the pursuit of truth and goodness. Art, along with the rest of the world (human and non-human), is affected by the Fall. But this need not lead us to say that art, and artistic creativity, are completely defined by their fallenness. Art might be touched by the inadequacies of our condition, but couldn't it still be part of that primal gift God gave to the human race when he created it and spoke the words 'It is good'? In their origin in God's act of creation, human beings *are* good. So the question is, are they also, in their good origins, creative; are they also created to be artistic; to decorate, to make signs, to improvise?

Well, they (we) are in the image of *God*. So perhaps, before we ask whether we human beings are made to be artists in our very origins – at the most basic level of our being – we should ask whether the God in whose image we are is an artist. And I am with St Augustine on this – for whom the answer is quite clearly 'yes'. God *is* an artist, and we know this from, amongst other things, the beards that grow on men's chins, and the nipples that men have on their chests. What does he mean by such a statement? Well, he is drawing attention to the fact that these things are otherwise completely pointless. They have no other useful purpose or function other than – he assumes – decoration. But, says Augustine, that is precisely the point; they are there for beautification, and that is enough. They need no added justification.

This opens up what I think is a crucial contrast, and it lies at the heart of the matter. The contrast is between the reductively utilitarian, and the spontaneously, excessively

gratuitous. We live in a world of *interests* – a functional world, in which the bottom line is king, and the only justification for beauty is that it is marketable and will make money. Beauty is no longer its own justification. If for no other reason than this, our world is one that the ancient world would have utterly failed to understand. A utilitarian approach to the content and purposes of human life will dismiss art for exactly the same reasons that it dismisses worship. It seems like a waste of resources. It serves no obvious human interest or use. It makes no difference whether your plough is an ugly plough or a beautified plough, so long as it breaks up the earth.

But the fact that human beings, all through their history, *have* decorated their tools of work, and their homes, their vehicles, their eating and drinking vessels, and even their weapons of war, indicates that there is something very profound in their make-up that inclines them to free spontaneity – to something in excess of the functional. And this may be because they serve and are in the image of a God who puts nipples on men's chests and beards on their chins. Or, to put it another way (but it's the same point), because they serve and are in the image of a God of grace – of the non-reductive; the excessive; the innovatory; the uncalled-for. It is the sheer unnecessary *gratuity* of the arts which makes them such a good witness to the abundant, overflowing life of the Holy Trinity.

We are surrounded, in life, by things that are neither *necessary* nor the automatic result of predictable processes – things that are, we might say, 'superadded'; that overflow into existence, bringing us something uniquely 'more than' what was already there. New human lives, for instance. It is this experience of the 'superadded' that the Christian language of grace so often tries to capture. Grace is what brings the world to be when it *need not* be; it is what allows the physical universe to be itself, with all the wonderful subtlety of its processes. Christians believe that the created universe is the overflowing of the *love of God*. If God's love is the endlessly rich self-giving at the heart of the Trinity, then God's grace is the *overflow* of that love into the free creation of something completely *new*, something 'more', to which this divine love can be extended, and with which it can be shared. It need not happen, but it does.

All acts of creativity are in some way, therefore, acts of grace. Every new, free improvisation in relation to an old tune. Every friendship that blossoms when people with their own self-sufficient lives meet and are prepared to extend the range of their loyalty and affection. And every act of forgiveness – that distinctive form of grace. Forgiveness is that which *need not* be offered in a situation where someone is in the wrong; but it *can* be offered, freely and graciously, as a superaddition to what is already there. Those who are best at it – perhaps like those who are best at friendship and even (in a slightly different way) those who are best at improvisation – are those who are open and responsive to the graciousness of things; who see new possibilities in every situation. Those who receive each experience, each circumstance, as abundant, fresh, charged with opportunity.

In today's readings, we celebrate the figure of St Peter, the prince of the apostles, and the person to whom Jesus said 'on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'. Peter is going to be made into something new, and wildly in excess of what his original state as a provincial fisherman would seem to promise. He is raw material whose potential lies hidden – and both he and, probably, those around him would have dismissed the thought that he could be laid as the foundation stone for a new order of things: the Church of Jesus Christ. He is rough, dirty, unfashioned, angular.

What sort of eye could perceive the beauty and strength within, waiting to be called out? What sort of eye could discern the fact that labour invested in this man would not be pointless labour, but labour in the service of something glorious?

The answer is: the eye of an artist-God, who sees real possibilities of releasing new life and being where we see only entrapment and fixity. Peter in chains, in the Book of Acts, thought the angel releasing him was just a dream; only very slowly did he accept it was *real* – he was *really* free. The artist-God is committed to showing us the reality of things we cannot yet see – or dismiss as mere fancy. He makes saints out of labourers through the artistry of grace – unprogrammed and creative; displaying that the basic dynamism of the divine life is ‘moreness’. He shows us that there is always more in the world than what we think we see, and he invites us into this ‘more’.

And even the Cross, which is the disclosure of this divine life to us, is perhaps in the same way God’s artwork. It reveals his glory. It embodies the extraordinary creativity of his response to the raw world around him – doing something wholly new, radical and unconventional with the rather unpromising resources that are handed to him; refusing the usual options governed by self-interest, utility, desire for money. Emptying himself for love. To live and die in such a way is a feat of phenomenal imagination and energy – it is real artistry. Artists all know what it is like to work with recalcitrant raw materials, and to make the best of circumstances that are less than ideal. Christ lives and dies like an artist.

And we are to do likewise – in the footsteps of St Peter and all the saints. Precisely because of the spontaneous gratuity of the God who loves us, who makes us in his image and relates to us in a human life, there should be no end to our *own* creative openness, our spontaneity, our quest to explore his riches and to comprehend his love ever more deeply in all that comes our way.

Not to be creative would be to fail to respond adequately to the God in whose image we are. Not to be creative would quite simply be to be a poor creature.

Ben Quash