

Sermon Preached At St Mary's Warwick
on 24th June 2018
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Art and Prophecy

Divine Art

At one time in his life, the poet Wilfred Owen had thought of being ordained. He even worked for a time as a lay assistant to the Revd Herbert Wigan, in the parish of Dunsden in the years 1911 and 1912. It was not a happy time. Owen and Wigan, whom Owen respected as his theological "Headmaster", seemed continually at odds. After an extended period of discord, Owen finally shook the theological dust of Dunsden from his feet, and left the parish. Following his death in France in 1918, a draft of a letter was found amongst his papers. On the back of an envelope, Owen had drafted a missive to his parish priest outlining the reasons for his dissatisfaction: "Dear Vicar", he wrote, "the Christian life affords no imagination, no physical sensation, nor aesthetic philosophy." He continued, "I have not the slightest feeling of humility for anything in existence, but The Eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty and the Memory of Great Men."

Wilfred Owen's words are a stark reminder that without an affirmation of beauty there can in the end be no faith and no God worth

our love. As St Augustine reminds us, "All the beautiful objects designed by artists' souls and realized by skilled hands come from that Beauty which is higher than souls." Augustine goes on to say, "After that Divine Beauty my soul sighs day and night. My God and my glory, for this reason I say a hymn of praise to you and offer praise for him who offered sacrifice and Beauty for me."

In his inspirational book, *Art & The Beauty of God*, theologian and former Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, explained: "The Church has not always been able to get the balance right between physical and spiritual beauty, between the beauty of God and the beauty of the world, including the arts." He continued, "In response to the inordinate, obsessive love for things of this world shown by many, the Church has sometimes gone to the other extreme. Yet," Bishop Harries contends, "the Christian view must be simply this: have as high a view of earthly beauty as you like, provided that your view of heavenly beauty is higher. Have as high a doctrine of the arts as you like, provided your view of Christ, the invisible made visible, is higher."

We are surrounded this evening by extraordinary array of art, including works produced by pupils from our local schools, for our

annual Schools Art exhibition, and the “Angel of Dresden” by the internationally renowned sculptor, Charles Walker Hazzard.

All art, according to Gerard Manley Hopkins, in its very uniqueness, shines forth the glory of God. All things of Beauty speak of Creation, all gifts from above that point us to and enable us to connect with God, the Divine Artist and Creator of all and Giver of all precious gifts. Art is a window, a portal to heaven and earth. Regardless of intention, every artist is a chronicler of their times. They are also, simultaneously, prophetic, for art is always of its moment, and is always prophetic. On this feast of John the Baptist, it seems appropriate to be considering the prophetic nature of art.

What are these young artists telling us about our world today, what are they revealing about what is important to them, their feelings, fears, hopes, joys and anxieties? What wonders, what warnings do they impart? And -- what, and how do they speak of the Kingdom of God? For, whether they realise it or not, intend to or not, they do speak of God and of God’s Kingdom.

For his part, Charles Walker Hazzard explores the human condition affected by both the loss of human life and cultural heritage destroyed by aerial bombardment - Hazzard’s figure represents an

intercessory angel, standing between those still alive, and the terror raining down from aircraft overhead.

Unlike the angel Gabriel, Hazzard's angel is silent. Yet, he stands within an architectural structure that calls to mind the rigging of a boat, or the inner workings of a clock, the machinations of Time. In his neutrality, he speaks of the order of things, and all things being held together by God. The Divine Engineer.

The two drums poised on either side of the figure may be the drums of war, or the timpanis of peace. It is left for the viewer to decide. Symbolically, the identical drums counter-balanced on either side may represent the twinned cities of Coventry and Dresden. Both destroyed and resurrected. Both held in equal love before God, longing to reverberate in peace and reconciliation. Hazzard's work, whether it speaks to us directly or not, in the sense of it being the kind of art we appreciate, it speaks of God in both immediate and prophetic ways.

Human longing for beauty is evoked by beauty itself. So said Plato. St Augustine took Plato's ideas further and surmised that God is the ultimate goal of the human longing evoked by experiences of beauty. The goal of the Christian life has sometimes been conceived as "the beatific vision". This conveys the idea of that which is unutterably

beautiful transfixing us in rapture. That is “being taken out of ourselves”. More of thee, less of me. Or, in the words of John Baptist “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)

Driven by his passion for Beauty and longing for God, St Augustine crafted the following prayer:

“My love for you, Lord, is not an uncertain feeling but a matter of conscious certainty. With your word you pierce my heart, and I loved you...But when I love you, what do I love? It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odour of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna nor honey, not limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace of my inner self, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.”

Amen.