

Is there a Christian art and are these the last days?

God gave us life when he created us. And he renewed this gift in the Resurrection. This life is not just biological life. It is life of a particular kind. We are made in the image of God. And this means that, in our small and human way, we copy God's handiwork. This is our vocation – to be like God, to share his life. This means that, like God, we make things. God's creation reveals God's nature: *the heavens, the work of his fingers: the moon and the stars which he has ordained*. And as God's creation displays God's character, so what we make reveals what sort of people we are. This is why paintings and poetry, music and buildings are important.

For two thousand years western art has testified to the Christian faith. Our art, and in the broadest sense our culture, is historically rooted in Christianity. The greatest paintings of the Christian era are the Madonna and Child, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, scenes from the life of Christ and his coming again in glory at the Last Judgement. The great poems set out the drama of our redemption: we think of *The Divine Comedy* or *Canterbury Tales* which is, of course, the story of a people on a pilgrimage.

Our music had its origins in the sublime tradition of early polyphony in monasteries and cathedrals such as Notre Dame. The wonderful Masses of Byrd and Palestrina – today's deeply religious setting by Lassus – would not have been possible without the eerie primitive beginnings in the 12th century by Perotin and his colleagues. And the greatest physical representations of Christianity are the glorious Gothic cathedrals – one in most European cities and a parish church in every village. As we look at what we have made, we discover again the truth that our faith is indissolubly connected to material things.

The word is made flesh. Christ is risen from the dead, not as a ghost but a living body asking his disciples for something to eat. Even the mysterious prophecies about our destiny after death do not speak of the immortality of the soul but the resurrection of the body. The last book in the Bible does not tell of God transmigrating our souls into an ethereal nirvana. Rather, God promises *a new heaven and a new earth*.

For us, as for God himself, creation, making things, is not incidental: it is our purpose. Making things is part of our faith. T.S. Eliot said,

Religion is the whole way of life of a people from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture.

He adds that *The culture of a people is the incarnation of its religion*.

Our arts are not just entertainment. They are what we make of the image of God within us. That is why we say that a masterpiece is inspired. It follows from this that the sorts of things we make and do reveal without fail the sorts of people we are. Or as F.R. Leavis put it, *Show me what you value and I'll tell you what you're worth*

When we say that our culture is the incarnation of our religion, it doesn't mean it has to be so explicitly. Not every fine tune belongs in the Mass. Not every novel is *Pilgrim's Progress*. And it wouldn't do if every building were a cathedral. Our art

traditionally displays our religious values by questioning them. The Bible does this. Look at *The Book of Job* which puts God in the dock. Or Moses who argues with God. Or Jacob who wrestles with him. The tragedies of Shakespeare are the profoundest works because they ask the ultimate questions of life and death. Even works which appear to deny our faith can never do so entirely. Nietzsche could only say *God is dead* because Moses first said *God is alive*

But there is no escaping the truth that what we make and do shows us what manner of people we are. What does it say when for example Michel Duchamp exhibits a urinal because, he says, he wants to destroy art? But the art critics are more perverse when they say that Duchamp's urinal is itself a work of art and write scholarly articles about it. What does it tell us about ourselves when a modern artist can invent the idea of an installation and say that anything is a work of art if he says it is? I once caused a minor stir in Tate Modern by asking whether a real can of *Coca Cola* left by mistake on an installation of a workshop was itself a work of art or not. Clearly, we are not meant to ask such impertinent questions.

Or think back to Palumbo's scheme to destroy the beautiful Victorian buildings at the bottom of Poultry, to abolish the medieval street plan and to construct a hideous square of windswept concrete. Though that toytown Number One Poultry went ahead. What does it say about a civilisation which allows men the contempt out of which they deface the public spaces, the places where we live and work? Even the pagan Greeks recognised that public space is sacred space. Or what of Corbusier who said *A house is a machine for living in* and submitted a plan for the destruction of Paris in the interests, as he put it, of *hygiene*?

What do we say of the nihilism which says that anyone, how ever illiterate, can write a poem and which in any case thinks a poem is any piece of writing where the words don't quite reach the margins? Sometimes it seems to me that the trademark of our present age is a snarl of contempt. There is certainly a widespread hatred expressed against anyone who insists there must be standards and quality in art as in everything else. The philistine culture we now endure has even abolished the distinction between music and rock and pop. We are meant to regard it all as music – even the violence and hatred expressed in rap lyrics.

Where Palumbo's infantilised legoland Number One Poultry now stands, Eliot used to pass by on his way to his work at *Lloyds*. Forty years ago City men wore pinstripes and bowlers and read *The Times*. Now they go hatless and dress down. They still read *The Times*, but this is what *The Times* advertises on a typical day:

Tonight sees the return of a series that delights in the description 'The Black sheep of Channel Four's flock'. It is aimed fairly and squarely at a young post-pub audience and it's basically no more than a dangerous variation on Candid Camera.

Among its attractions is 'the annoying devil' dressed in red PVC who pours water on top of a woman who has just had her hair done. A couple of idiots hurt each other with darts and snooker balls. A man hurls junk food at unsuspecting members of the public. A house-hunting couple make out in front of the estate agent and a female interviewer humiliates celebrities. The audience whoop and cheer throughout.

I read this and turned for relief to St Augustine, *City of God, Book II*:

The people are unconcerned about the utter corruption of their country. 'So long as it lasts,' they say, 'so long as it enjoys material prosperity why should we worry? What concerns us is that we should get richer all the time and have enough for extravagant spending every day. Full publicity is given where shame would be appropriate; close secrecy is imposed where praise would be in order. Decency is veiled from sight; indecency is exposed to view. Scenes of evil attract packed audiences; good words scarcely find any listeners. It is as if purity should provoke a blush and corruption give ground for pride

St Augustine in his time looked on all this and prophesied there would come a reckoning. It did come, in the form of the downfall of the Roman Empire and the descent into the Dark Ages. We look out over the Western world today and see it is much like Augustine's Rome. We too have barbarians at the gate and moral squalor within – can anyone doubt that there will be for us too a reckoning?