

Sermon: The Christian idea of the beautiful...

One of the best hymns in the book is one we sing in the New Year: *O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness*. This is adapted from Psalm 96: *O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: let the whole earth stand in awe of him*. Well, last week we examined the nature of truth in connection with the Christian faith; today I'd like us to think for a while about the idea of beauty.

Just as we discovered that truth is not a mere matter of opinion, we should understand that beauty is not simply a matter of opinion either. The comparison is with morality: what is right and wrong is not just a matter of opinion either, but still we can have vigorous disagreements about what is the right thing to do in a particular case. I mean, you could intelligently discuss whether it would be right to terminate a pregnancy if it were discovered that the foetus would be born without its arms and legs, blind and very severely brain-damaged. But there could be no discussion with anyone who believes that it is perfectly legitimate to kill people for pleasure.

Let us think about artistic beauty for a minute. A fashion has arisen for defining a work of art as anything that anyone says is a work of art. This is just as silly as The Macpherson Report on institutional racism which irrationally defines a racist incident as *any incident so described by the victim or any other person*. This would mean that, if I invite you to take a cup of tea with me, you could interpret this as a racist insult. Such definitions make me feel I'm living in the madhouse. I get the same queasy feeling when someone tells me that an unmade bed is a work of art; or a light bulb flashing on and off; or a long crack in the floor in Tate Modern's turbine room.

This is the doctrine of the artistic *installation* and it was first performed by Michel Duchamp who exhibited a urinal. As Roger Kimball says: *And art students have been repeating this same weak joke ever since as if it were original and shocking*. The fashion in much art today is the desire to shock, and so many modern artists are like the naughty little boy who comes up behind old ladies and shouts *Boo!* It's not shocking after a while though, is it? – just the fourth form up to its childish tricks. There is also much talk about the need to think about the purpose of art. There was a piece in *The Times* the other week which said, *It's time to rethink the Turner Prize* – which makes the unfounded assumption that there was thought in it first time round.

People who claim that anything can be anything – whether the subject is morality, racism or art criticism – are as misguided as Humpty Dumpty in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* who said, *When I use a word, it means just exactly what I mean it to mean – neither more nor less*. That just makes meaning meaningless. And whether you take your artistic theories from John Ruskin or from Aristotle, it is all the same: theories of art don't take us very far. The truth is we learn from actual examples.

Some years ago when Chris Smith was the Minister for Culture – a title that puts me in mind of Joseph Goebbels's saying, *When they talk about culture I reach for my gun* – Mr Smith was asked whether he thought Beethoven was better than Bob Dylan, he replied, *It is not my business to establish hierarchies*. But the point is, Mr Smith, that hierarchies have been established already – in this case by Beethoven.

Theories are beside the point and ultimately quite useless, except to give people something to fill in their time in the art college or the philosophy department. We learn from exemplars. We learn from the masters. The masters set the standards – whether we're talking about music, painting or cricket or cuisine. Of course your taste might be for Nigella rather than Delia. But taste tells us nothing about the object itself, only about the one who is doing the tasting.

Beauty reaches far beyond art, music and literature, for it is characteristic of the atheists call the natural world – or as Christians would say *creation*. For beauty, like truth and like goodness, has its origin in God. But we mustn't think of beauty as belonging to objects in the world, as if beauty were a quality like size or yellowness: beauty is in the relationship between the object and the person who comes into contact with it. The world is haunted by the presence of God and we are the ones who feel this haunting presence. In John Ruskin's expression, we are touched by the *sublime*. And our reaction is to be moved and thrilled by it.

You might be looking at a robin balancing on the edge of the birdbath. At the gorgeousness of autumn in the forest, the trees like old ladies in their tattered finery. Or at the gentle and mysterious winding course of the river below a high hill in Langport, Somerset, as it trails away like a tale being told. Contact with the sublime is often as if you become suddenly spirit-possessed: the sudden image of great Gable reflected perfectly in the glassy lake Wastwater. That is the haunting and you draw your breath.

But this haunting can be terrifying. I remember walking one January night through the Valley of the Rocks, *Lorna Doone* country, in north Devon. As I rounded a bend in the road, I saw suddenly against the pitch black sky a mountain sheer and even blacker. I could not look at it and I turned back, feeling what Wordsworth described in *The Prelude* about the cliff over the lake.

This too is beauty; this is the sublime: but it is a terrible beauty.

*Come in under the shadow of this red rock and...
I will show you fear in a handful of dust*

This is beauty and it is also the haunting presence of God. It is well-recorded in The Bible. Do you remember how Jacob after a night in the wilderness exclaims: *How awful is this place!* This returns us to our text *O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness* – for in the end beauty and holiness are part of the same thing. And holiness is something *other* – something alienating and strange. It is wonder and awe. Recall the prophet Isaiah in the temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.....and one cried to another Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried; and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone.

And this ecstatic vision of the sublime was for Isaiah connected to his sense of unworthiness to receive it. He goes on to say: *I am a man of unclean lips*. Or think of Adam in the garden after his first disobedience:

And Adam heard the voice of the Lord walking in the garden in the cool of the evening. And the Lord God called unto Adam and said, Where art thou?

Let me give you a little meditation on beauty and the sublime. Think of the face of Christ. Think of Christ's face when he is alone with the woman caught in adultery:

When Jesus had lifted up himself and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more.

There is infinite compassion and tenderness.

The face of Christ. Think of his face in the garden of the Resurrection when he turned to Mary Magdalene: *Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?* And then just the one word, *Mary*.

But think of Christ's face after Peter had denied him: *And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter...and Peter remembered...*

Think of Christ's face *then*. Think of Christ's face as he hung on the Cross.

Our sensitivity to the beautiful and the sublime, to the haunted holiness of landscape and the human face, is, you might say, the short proof of the existence of God: for it is a tangible meeting with him. That sensation we call beauty is the brooding presence of God himself in the world he has made.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: let the whole earth stand in awe of him.