

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 25 August 2019 Pentecost 11

“Creativity alive and now’

Spirit and the Arts Pillar

As a renowned music and arts venue, St Andrew's nourishes the spiritual life of the city. We seek to develop further a ministry that links spirituality and the arts.

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

2 Samuel 6: 12-16

12 Now King David was told, “The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.” So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. 13 When those who were carrying the ark of the Lord had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. 14 Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, 15 while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets. 16 As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart.

Gospel

Matthew 6: 25-30

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet they are fed. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? 28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Contemporary Reading

‘Art and Christian Spirituality: ‘Companions in the Way’ *Direction Journal* Fall 1998 by Luci Shaw· Vol. 27 No. 2 · pp. 109–22

... the partnership of art and spirituality probes the meanings that lie beneath the surface of all phenomena, waiting to be recognized and acknowledged. And this is, of course, the benison of the sacramental view of life, in which everything points to something, and everything is significant—a sign, a symbol.

ART BRINGS ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

...For me art is the impulse that gathers materials from our disparate but rich and compellingly diverse universe and assembles them in a way that brings a kind of order out of their chaos, an order with elements of both conflict and resolution. Art is also the result of our human impulse to find expression for that something within us that responds to the stimuli surrounding us, crying out to be expressed, to find meaning in beauty, or terror, or sex, or something as mundane as food, and to reflect this in a form, a medium which produces a response—awe, excitement, disgust, wonder, even shock or anger, in those around us. I’ve concluded that there is nothing in the universe about which poetry cannot be written.

This aesthetic impulse seems to be universal. Art finds meaning in all of human experience or endeavour, drawing from it strength and surprise by reminding us of what we know but may never have recognized truly before, transcending our particularity with soaring ease.

Reflection for the Gathering

David danced before the Lord, the people of Israel got elaborate instructions for what decoration was and was not allowed in the tabernacle, the art of pottery is mentioned by the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus drew something, we do not know what, in the sand.

References to the arts in the scriptures are few and far between, yet the as a whole, the holy book begins with a burst of life in the act of creation. A creator implies creativity. Just as in any drama, it is wise to notice what images are presented in the first act, so with scripture. That is how the continuing theme is set.

Creativity is therefore, Genesis 1 and 2 tell us, front and centre in the Israelite view of the divine energy. This is not a reflection about the relative merits of creation and evolution, as the stories in Genesis 1 and 2 are not about establishing method and technique but about theological ideas.

The divine, let's admit, is as mysterious to us today as it was to those ancient writers. The divine, they intuited, was a generative, creative force. The very nature of God, the essence of a divine being for them was creating, making, shaping, bringing into being, forming, developing.

The planet as we know it now, the story tells us, forms through changing time and seasons; it is populated with life of many forms and they develop into other forms. Millennia go by. And I wonder, (if we imagine God as an actual person here), I wonder if God was like my Sunday school students when I was a university student... I was telling them this story one day with breathless intonation and exciting details when one child suddenly interrupted asking "When do we get to play with the plasticine!" I like to imagine God getting impatient for the time when the clay came out and human beings were on the agenda for the day!

I know it didn't happen like that at all but it's fun imagining it. And that is the key to spirituality and the Arts, Spirit and the Arts, imagination. Also intuition, creative expression, lateral thinking.

In the arts we often literally go off script because script and text, book and documents are not enough to express what the Spirit is saying to the heart – that centre of us which is not the beating throbbing muscular organ in our chest, but situated in a kind of metaphysical space between the mind and the soul and perhaps too, the gut.

Words cannot always capture the beauty we see or feel, they cannot always describe the feelings we cannot name, they cannot always report accurately the connections we intuit.

So, in the arts we use other objects than a pencil or keyboard or ball point pen. Sometimes our bodies are our pens, swaying in the dance gently, then gathering, and with a massive push of muscles leaping to heights to express joy; we train our muscles' memory to play on violin, flute or piano, organ, drums or clarinet so we can make sounds that are both beautiful, soothing and calming or brutal, challenging and shocking. We employ brushes and needles and pottery wheels, hands and feet, stencils and canvas, board and walls to say in paint or fabric or clay what we cannot put into words. In the world of drama, films and television, we stylise life by fitting words into dramatic form. We enhance our analysis of life by watching it being enacted out before us on the stage. It takes all our energy, skills, nuance of expression and tone of voice, to get across the deeper reflection which the playwright is striving to put across.

And the life we are seeking to portray, to interpret, to comment upon, is increased a thousand times by the different artists' impressions in dance and paint and print and clay and stone and music. Those very works of art then, themselves, add to the richness of the landscape around us, they enter our culture and become the stuff of their own legends.

The connection between spirituality and the arts is a big topic and one which St Andrew's needs to embrace for the future. Some like music, others painting, some drama, some dance, others sculpture, but what is the connection to our faith? Not just when the artistic product has overt Christian

references, but when it is simply beautiful or simply a brutal challenge to the senses. What does it do for our spirit? What do we do with the Arts when they disturb and challenge us? Is art just to decorate or to also lead us on in our growth and development, sometimes in ways which are uncomfortable and stretching.

This makes me think of the Stations of the Cross by Professor Bob Gauldie. They are polarising within our congregation. Some say they 'hate' them – other like or love them. The artist used a prolific object which was on The Terrace at the time – oil drums – the precursor to the now ubiquitous traffic cones. In doing so, he embeds the last journey of Jesus into our context. He puts Jesus on The Terrace and the onlookers and other participants there too.

In using oil drums for the people he avoids the difficulty and distraction of representational art where we may then have stood around and said "I don't like the expression he put on Jesus' face". "I think Jesus would have been taller, shorter, fatter, thinner, with less hair than that!"

He has also, believe or not, those of you who hate those paintings, delicately avoided depicting Jesus as a person – as if to respect the mystery of Jesus as the truly ineffable and intangible entity he was. We know an oil drum isn't Jesus, but it is placed where he was, it is doing what he did, so we are saved from critiquing a realistic representation. We are let loose to be involved in the action as one of those who walk the terrace while road construction is going on and observe the action.

You are also free to imagine yourself as an oil drum in the crowd, or as one of the actors in the scenes or even as Jesus himself. After all, anyone can be an oil drum if they choose to! Maybe when the stations of the cross come out in 2021 you can look at them with new eyes.



Then we have the hangings which change through the seasons, adding colour and significance to the sanctuary area. Purple with candles for Advent; white/gold for Christmas, green for epiphany and purple for Lent. White/gold again for Easter and green for ordinary time, red for Pentecost and commemorative days, blue for creation, then back to green, red for November and then the purple for advent completes the circle and starts a new year. and purples for advent. The seasonal colours of the year were a medieval device to mark the changing of the year so the mostly illiterate congregations of the time could keep track of the spiritual cycle.

Our own reformed tradition smashed into this tradition in the 16th century; iconoclastic, destroying statues, whitewashing over frescoes in church and banishing saints days to avoid superstition, apparently. Left to itself the reformed tradition is extremely plain and unadorned. It might then be no accident, and in fact a corollary of that banishment of art and colour and life, that protestant theology in its plainest form is strict and word based, uncompromising and sometimes very rigid.

The only prohibition in scripture against art along with other delights in which we might indulge, is that it is not made an idol. Not a free standing little-doll-kind-of-idol, but that it not become what we worship. Always the true focus of our life needs to be cultivation of the deep Self within. If for any reason, any of the Arts would distract us from that search rather than enhance that search we need to notice that trend and do something about it.

I haven't proved that arts and spirituality are linked, but others more versed in philosophy art and theology than I can do that. I want to finish with a snippet from a blog by Jan Richardson, whose painting is on the front of the order of service and also one or two of hers have already gone by on the screen. She begins with a quote from the book she goes on to write about:

*Treat the arts as a window dressing for the truth rather than a window into reality.
Embrace bad art.
Demand artists to give answers in their work, not raise questions.
Never pay artists for their work.*

These are a few of the guidelines that Philip G. Ryken offers in a great article published online this week, one that I wish every person connected with a church would read. In "How to Discourage Artists in the Church," Ryken, a pastor and the president of Wheaton College, writes about making the "sad discovery" that so many folks—artists as well as non-artists—have long known: "The arts are not always affirmed in the life of the local church." Ryken goes on to write, "We need a general rediscovery of the arts in the context of the church. This is badly needed because the arts are the leading edge of culture."

Ryken's words drew me back to the time when, after serving for some years as a pastor in a congregation, I was appointed to a ministry as the artist in residence at San Pedro Center, a retreat and conference center owned by the Catholic Diocese of Orlando. For several years after moving there, I often crossed paths with friends and colleagues who would ask, "So, Jan, are you still on that sabbatical?" Knowing that I was doing something connected with the arts, they figured I was taking a break from ministry—doing something that was more vacation than vocation.

Jan's comments are a timely warning as we consider this Pillar. We invite others in to do music a lot here, and we are investing a lot of money and effort in restoring the pipe organ, but the other arts are less obviously supported. What could we do that would enhance our spiritual journeys through music and the other arts too? Let that thought roll around in the back of your mind.

Ironically, yesterday I was sent an email from Earth Diverse which, together with the Waikato Interfaith Council, Artmakers Trust and the University of Waikato's ecumenical chaplains' office began yesterday a series of talks, readings, music and dance performances, practical workshops and an ongoing exhibition devoted to the theme of Art and Spirituality – it runs from yesterday to 30 September. Jan Richardson would be pleased to hear of the initiative! At first I thought it was only on this weekend, but I can send the link to anyone who wants it and it is in the written script of this reflection www.earthdiverse.org.nz

As we allow the challenge of the arts to percolate, ferment and bubble up ideas to the surface in a truly creative process; in the meantime, how can you arrange your life so you encounter more artworks, more music, dance, drama and sculpture so that you personally find your journey deeper and richer and your life more full and free?

Spirit and the Arts - we need them both because they are both about each other.
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