

The Third Sunday of Lent – 2019

At the beginning of the eighth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he has his own Donald Rumsfeld moment! 'Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; [but anyone who loves God is known by him.]' That is the context of today's passage we just heard.

The Lord Howe Rockfest takes place this weekend. It began simply as a programme to introduce children to music. The evidence was overwhelming music makes you better at maths and reading; so let's get children doing music. As a member of a University Human Research Ethics committee I recently reviewed a research proposal trying to prove that music does more than just make us better writers or Mathematicians. The researcher made the bold claim, and I quote 'music is an essential element of what it means to be human.' The committee asked her to revisit her proposal. It will be difficult, (I wondered about the humanity of those who are tone deaf!!) how do we quantify the benefit to education and society from music, art, poetry. Can we *know* the benefit of the arts for society?

A century ago the German people were reeling from the aftermath of the Great War. In Bavaria amidst the despondency of defeat, the food shortages, the grief and loss, a revolution of sorts was happening - the writers and poets took control. A theatre critic and poet Kurt Eisner became the leader of the Bavarian government. He and his cohort were writers, artists, poets, they were dreamers and visionaries and they set about trying to forge a way forward. They began by acknowledging that Germany had been the aggressor, to seek peace with the rest of Europe and indeed the world. Eisner would eventually be assassinated and in the ensuing turmoil another poet was elected who would in time be imprisoned along with his supporters, many of whom were Jews. The experiment was over; it had been watched from the sidelines by Lance Corporal Adolf Hitler.

The poet William Blake famously said: *The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.* The same could be said of music; that which might move us to tears of joy, is to others just a noise! And we can of course say the same about art and poetry. Can we not say paraphrasing Blake: But to the eyes of the person of imagination, faith is imagination itself? I feel that music, art and poetry are crucial to our understanding of matters of faith because they engage our imaginations, and we have heard at our Lenten studies how significant this is.

What is it about the arts that fires the imagination? I turned to philosophy; Alain de Botton suggests that art has seven functions which might help us. They are Remembering, Hope, Sorrow, Rebalancing, Self-understanding, Growth and Appreciation. Each of these functions can be given a theological bent and are crucial elements to understanding matters of faith glimpsed through our imagination. They are played out every time we gather and we can hear them time and time again in our sacred scriptures, we can see and hear them at play this morning.

The people of Israel have returned home in today's passage from Isaiah. Formerly exiled in Babylon, they now seek a new vision. Their ancestors believed that God's promises would be fulfilled, all would be well and yet disaster befell them. We can picture them in the ruined city... where do we begin, what will be our new ethic, our new politic, what is our vision of God? Isaiah rouses them up Ho! What an extraordinary opening! He lays out a new vision, a land in which all have enough, he is a poet. He calls the people to remember the past the promises of the covenant, 'I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.' He gives them hope for the future 'for he has glorified you.' But also calls upon them to be sorrowful 'let the wicked forsake their way.' Rebalancing, or repentance is a part of his part of his manifesto turn away from the old ways, they don't work: 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?' There needs to be a sense of a renewed understanding of who they are 'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.' He is within you - grow and appreciate this. But remember: 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,' Like Paul's warning to the Corinthians don't be too confident: So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. Grow into and appreciate my ways, my thoughts.

Jesus of course is *the* prophet, and whilst we wouldn't call him a poet he comes close: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! He embodies the prophetic vision of the poets and what a wonderful vision! The healing vision that Jesus offered then, as now, is not a science, it can't be measured; it's not about knowledge, but faith, it's an art. In Jesus' day of course the fox, Herod was on the sidelines watching.

The passage from Paul is set in the context of a discussion about knowledge and the ethics committee is a reminder to me of the value we place on knowledge and it has a crucial role to play. But so do the things that we cannot 'know' including the beauty and the challenge of art, poetry and music. The visions they afford us, the glimpses they give us into a better way. Religious faith at its heart is all about this glimpse of a

better way. It involves us in Remembering, Hoping, Sorrowing, Rebalancing, Self-understanding, Growing and Appreciating.

Clearly the arts give us a vision and part of being a human is to pursue a vision. Perhaps this is what our researcher is striving for? We of course as Christians are called to more...we are called to strive to make the vision a reality? The problem is there all are always those on the sidelines who darken and blur our vision, the events in Christchurch are a case in point. We ask why; but Paul of course called his correspondents to faith not knowledge; that was his vision. He knew it would be difficult, faith by its nature is always being tested; this is what Lent is about. But he assures us we will not tested beyond your strength, indeed he assures us that anyone who loves God is known by him. I pray we will find comfort in that assurance, in what over the past ten days or so has become a difficult Lent. Amen.