

ART AND RELIGION

Canon Michael Austin 13th June 1998

The morning was a stimulating blend of expressions of personal viewpoint, reminiscence, quotation and discussion which does not lend itself to summarising. A few key points and quotations are given below.

Canon Austin began by saying that he wished to share a few thoughts specifically about the relationship between art and the Christian faith, rather than with religion generally, and he quoted the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834); "Religion and art stand beside each other like two friendly souls whose inner relationship, if they suspect it, is still unknown to them,"

To change the metaphor, religion and art are two neighbouring open plains, both with certain signposts to guide one along the main highways. They both have frontiers guarded by the upholders of inflexible orthodoxies, but between them is a no man's land, a whispering forest where there can be giving and receiving, learning from each other, and we will try to pick a pathway through it this morning.

The almost stunning beauty of Southwell Minster, and its music, can for some make worship easier, though of course worship is possible anywhere; and experience shows that true art, where the artist has integrity, can have a penetrating impact.

Some of the Early Fathers, and later the Calvinists, shared a distrust of beauty, which they saw as distracting us from God. There is indeed a tension within the Western world's perception of the Christian faith between its Greek inheritance and its Hebrew antecedents. The former, with its emphasis both on the visual awareness of space and boundaries, with everything seen in a timeless clear light, and on the rational intelligence, leads us to the theological approach, but one combined with an appreciation at least of visual beauty. The latter, however, is time-centred, rooted in a historical experience of wanderings in a featureless desert where spatial boundaries had no significance

- an experience which, coupled with divine injunctions against graven images, led to a culture which emphasised poetry (the poetry which in many cultures precedes prose) and music, as opposed to the graphic arts.

It is interesting that Holbein, moving from the traditions of Catholic Europe to the norms of Henry VIII's court in England, was able to change the whole thrust of his art without sacrificing his personal artistic integrity.

In this century, Karl Barth was one of the leaders of the reaction against Schleiermacher's emphasis on feeling as the basis of religion; he argued the importance of revelation from God as the source of faith. But even he wrote: "..., the golden sounds and melodies of Mozart's music have always spoken to me - not as gospel, but as parables of the Kingdom revealed in the gospel of God's free grace, and they continue to do so with the utmost freshness. Without it I could not think of what moves me personally in theology, in politics."

The artist and the saint are not the same, not interchangeable, but they have much to contribute, each to the other. The artist can show us at the same time, as in Bellini's¹ "St. Francis in the Desert", both the particularity of Nature, and the saint in touch with the divine. He can thus hint at the transcendent: yet in such images as the hand of God in our west window (cf the references to God in human terms In the Bible, eg his hand, his strong arm) he can hint too at God's immanence.

1 Giovanni Bellini C1430-1516. See overleaf,

As stewards we may find some visitors to the Minster coming for deeply religious reasons, while others are drawn by the beauty of its architecture. Let us remember that the latter may in fact find that beauty can be a "parable of the Kingdom".

Canon Austin read out the following comments by Eiiot Deutsch on the painting reproduced opposite. The comments are taken from *Essays on the Nature of Art*, published by the State University of New York Press in 1996:

Saint Francis is wholly in and out of relation to Nature. The realm of Grace is nowhere explicitly represented, yet there is no doubt that Saint Francis is

intimately involved with it. It is as though he were trying to bring everything in Nature along with him. The rocks and trees, birds and beasts, that are bathed in a pale blue glow, are being carried, through the power of his joy, to the colourless Divine, though they are indifferent to or are unaware of it.

Saint Francis is a part of Nature. He does not stand out from it by virtue of any pronounced position he occupies in the composition, yet it is clear that he is superior to Nature because of his ecstasy. He transcends Nature and, by transcending, celebrates it.

"No other great painting," writes Kenneth Clark, "perhaps contains such a quantity of natural details, observed and rendered with incredible patience; for no other painter has been able to give such an accumulation the unity which is only achieved by love." Bellini's love and Saint Francis's love are here the same. Their love is that joyous affirmation which is grounded in the depth of humility; it is that delicate feeling which brings a simple harmony to a rich complexity, it is that integrity which encompasses and transforms whatever it embraces. Yet there is a disquieting note. A subtle tension exists between this human love and that which is thought to be gracious. The love is unqualified, but can we be confident that it is being accepted by the hidden Divine? It is what is literally absent here, rather than what is present as such, that gives the work its tremendous excitement and suspense.

The book on the reading table is closed, for what use has Saint Francis for language? Language enables him to go beyond the temporal present; it carries him back to the past and forward to the future and makes everything present to him. But language is time-bound and ecstasy is timeless.

The donkey is in the present. His consciousness is momentary; it is exhausted by its experience at hand. Saint Francis is the present, the Now that contains and transcends all temporality. Yet, Saint Francis has a history. The skull on the table is his destiny, too.

Are Bellini and Saint Francis interchangeable? Can the artist be a saint or the saint an artist?

Bellini desires perfection for his work; Saint Francis, that state of being which for him is alone perfect.

Saint Francis needs that eternal silence which extinguishes all sound; Bellini that sound, that life which inspires growth and change.

Bellini must be involved with contrasts and with particular things in their unique particularity, and he must exhibit this involvement in his work. Saint Francis must care for nothing so little as to draw attention to something he may create. His sole concern is to draw attention to the silent Divine, to that which ultimately is without contrast or form.

Bellini and Saint Francis are not interchangeable. The artist and the saint cannot do each other's work.