

### A Journey of Infinite Possibilities

My tutor on my Arts and Humanities Course at the Open University was a wise old bird. No one would have guessed that she was a Dame of the British Empire. She wore her wisdom lightly. There was never a hint of arrogance or ostentatiousness about her. In her self-deprecating manner she would remind us lesser mortals with a phrase I have never forgotten and now frequently use, 'The teacher is always in front of you'. It doesn't matter who you are talking to she would tell us, you can always learn something from everyone, be it an adult or a child.

I have tried to follow through that maxim in my ministry and have benefited from her advice. Stan Taylor is not a household name, but in my position as vicar of St Mary's Primrose Hill in London, (the place where I was before moving to Windsor), I often came to rely on him for sermons and papers. Though he had been a dedicated worker in the precision tool-making business for 40 years, before he came to us as Verger Stan spent all his spare time making and restoring furniture. However, as he lived in a small, cramped retirement flat there was little room for the pursuit of his hobby. So, as we had a spare room at the back of the church, I came up with the idea of making him Verger. In lieu of payment, he used this room for his woodworking. Whenever someone entered the church a bell would ring in his office and out would trudge Stan to be that welcoming face. It worked well for both parties. He was given the space to pursue his hobby and we were able to keep the church open during the daytime.

'Stan', I said to him one morning quite casually, 'I'm writing a paper on the imagination. What is the imagination?' I asked. You could have knocked me down with a feather, when after a bit of thought, out shot his reply. 'The Imagination is the ability to divine aspects of our being'. It wasn't merely Stan's use of the verb *divine* which took me by surprise, but the fact that Stan seemed to have defined what it was to be human. He seemed to understand that creative seed in man. Perhaps it was his woodworking skills that gave him that insight.

We all struggle with what it means to be human and it is not helped when we seem to make a clear-cut distinction between what is human and what is divine; between the secular and the sacred. Even the word spiritual is somewhat nebulous these days – it

Sir Anthony Caro, the great British Sculptor, now in his 80<sup>th</sup> year, (there is a Retrospective of his at the Tate now), said in a recent television broadcast that sculpture was where his whole self was poured - it was his response to life. If, like Caro, art can help us to be in tune with our creative thoughts and ideas, can it also bring us in touch with what it means to be alive? For Caro, expressing his human spirit through his art is vital for his well-being.

In other words, it is to see and to bring forth what is there in front of our eyes – or perhaps more importantly, what is there already in its particularity. There is an Aborigine Prayer I like which goes: ‘Walk carefully as you go, for God is there already’.

Stanley Spencer, that celebrated English artist, (I respond I think to the earthiness of his paintings), said, ‘Art is 90% living’. If that is so, by the same token, I would suggest that for me *spirituality* is 90% living. It is not separate from life. It is not piety, for to be holy is to be natural, unaffected. Spirituality for me is life – it encompasses all aspects of our being and living. So, like Stan Taylor’s definition of the imagination, it is for us to unearth the gem within the everyday and ordinary. We who profess to be theologians must be on our guard, lest we deem the things of God to be defined solely within the confined world of piety. We don’t. Moreover, need to name God in order to be exploring what pertains to God. I have, therefore, no difficulty in recognising that God can be perceived through all the arts, whatever the form of expression. I have more of a problem with the assumption that God can be automatically perceived through religion. I believe fervently that God is known and can begin to be understood by many through the creative spirit, which continues to inspire.

This creativity often blossoms not at the safety of the centre but at the margins. It is at the margins that the questions of life are being asked. This is where new ground is broken. This is where the boundaries of our present human self-understandings are pushed open and where we seek to integrate new knowledge and insights. Risks are involved, for it can be a dangerous place. It can be elusive too – catch hold of it, keep it tight, and like a butterfly it disappears. Accordingly, you lose the fragility and the sacrament of the present moment.

pursued him to keep him in order. In fact I picked up two little stones; one to be thrown blindfold among the others in Stanbrook garden so that there may always be a stone from Bethlehem there, though nobody will know which it is and be tempted to steal it, and the other for your own self. You shall have them when I return . . . (Shaw, in Whitemore,1988:22).

So lets be open to the creative Spirit of God manifested, yes in so many ways, but very often through the arts.

When I attended a conference at Durham Cathedral in 1997, I witnessed a video installation called *Messenger*, by the leading video artist, Bill Viola. In his work generally Viola has explored universal human experiences such as life, death and the unfolding of consciousness through the lens of Eastern and Western art, and the spiritual traditions of Zen Buddhism, Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism. However, because his use of the naked human body in his video in the cathedral caused a certain amount of outrage, screens were put up around it. This gesture of protection set me thinking that we must jettison our reliance on the screens which shield us from all aspects of life – we must allow the arts to speak in their own powerful language. We are after all, all theologians – we can all speak of the things of God as they appear to us. Let us not then ring-fence God, and ring-fence life. Let us not dumb down culture and deem certain subjects in the curriculum to be more important than others.

Let us allow the arts their say, allow the imagination free rein, learn from the richness of one another where there is a common wealth of creativity. While we need a crucible in which to stir our creative, spiritual sensitivities, we certainly do not need religion to predict an acceptable outcome of the stirring. Expose then every part of human identity – the physical, the spiritual, the rational and the emotional in a joint human and divine endeavour - as Creator and created.

Rev'd. Canon John Ovenden