

I love it when the Proms get under way. Each year at the height of summer we have a joyous explosion of wonderful music on Radio 3 and quite often on television as well. Music speaks to us at a level that is deeper, I believe, than any other art form, touching us in our depths and speaking to us of the mystery of things. A Mozart symphony or a Handel aria can move us in ways that are simply inexpressible. “Music” writes George Steiner, “puts our being as men and women in touch with that which transcends the sayable and outstrips the analysable”.

I was thinking about this the other day when listening to a broadcast of Mozart’s “Exultate Jubilate”. A terrorist had just killed three policemen at Baton Rouge, a tragedy that came hard upon the terrible carnage in Nice where over a hundred died. All this on top of Brexit and the days of political mayhem we have endured as our Government was shaken up, together with the continuing leadership crisis in the Labour Party. But as I listened to Mozart’s music I found that somehow I had come to a new and more balanced perspective. As someone remarked, “Mozart makes sense of the light *and* the dark, the joy *and* the sorrow, life *and* death, but always with him the darkness is transcended and done away with in the light.”

Goodness knows, we need to find hope in days like these. We need to know where we can go to find refreshment, renewal, a sense of stability. St Paul once wrote: “I pray that your inward eyes may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope to which he calls you...and how vast are the resources of his power to those who have faith.” As we experience our world, particularly in times like these when things seem to be especially turbulent, we need to remind ourselves that we are relating to a God whom Jesus has shown to be Christlike and who is to be found in unlikely people and unlikely places. This kind of seeing is often the realm of poets, and it is often to the poets that I go to find some sense of hope and transcendence in times of trouble and stress. R.S.Thomas writes: “The truth, if that is the right way to describe the knowledge – half hope, half intuition – by which I live, is that alongside us, made invisible by the thinnest of veils, is the heaven we seek. It is within us, as Jesus said”.

We are fortunate if our experience of life has already revealed what nurtures this inner knowledge and reassurance within us. For me music and poetry provide this kind of sustenance. They point me in the right direction, help me to rediscover a sense of perspective, take me to a place where new possibilities can be imagined.

Artists can provide another way in. As you know, we have recently been marking the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme and reflecting on its' horrors. A number of artists who survived the war spent many years processing their experiences before they were ready to commit themselves to paper or canvas. Let me mention two, both profoundly influenced by their Christian faith - Stanley Spencer and David Jones. Spencer's Sandham Memorial Chapel painted between 1926 and 1932 is a profound meditation on the way in which ordinary people were wrenched out of domesticity into a world of inhuman confrontation. He paints humdrum activities like cutting sandwiches, filling water bottles, making beds, and manages to transform them so that they become signs of profound significance. He conveys a sense of the significance of ordinary activities and the power of the human spirit to surmount the worst possible outcomes. David Jones was both a writer and a painter and served as a private in the Royal Welch Fusiliers from 1915 and was wounded on the Western Front. Out of his wartime experiences was forged his great poetic work *In Parenthesis*, an attempt to see how the evil of war might in some way be redeemed. Both in his poetry and his paintings, he sees the nobility as well as the pain of a world which he regards as sacramental and of infinite value.

"Do not be afraid, little flock", says Jesus in today's Gospel reading. At anxious times like these we need to remind ourselves where to go to find renewal. I am suggesting that music, poetry and art can help take us beneath events that seem to threaten and undermine us, and so give us a new sense of perspective and hope. All the people I have mentioned reflect in their work a sense of God's presence and his power to transform, transfigure and redeem. When I listen to Mozart's music, read R.S.Thomas's poetry, look at paintings by Stanley Spencer or David Thomas, I am encouraged to listen more deeply, helped to see more clearly. The world is revealed as having meaning, beauty. People are shown to be capable of goodness, kindness. I am reminded that evil can be transformed, that life is redeemable, and that the future is in God's hands. I learn again to trust the topsy turvy world of God's kingdom -

It's a long way off, but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

So know where to go to find your soul-food. Each of us will be different in this respect. My youngest son takes himself off each year to the folk festivals at Bromyard and Whitby. He always comes back refreshed and revitalised. My brother finds renewal in his garden which over the years has become a source of enjoyment not just for him but for others too. Other friends go on walking holidays. There are many places, many ways that it is possible to find this kind of restoration. We just need to know what works for us. And then give our time and enthusiasm to it. We live in a sacramental world, which means that what is outward and visible can become the means through which God gives his grace to nourish in us a healthy perspective and a confident hope for the future.

The point is seeing – the grace
beyond recognition, the ways
of the bird rising, unnamed, unknown,
beyond the range of language, beyond its noun.
Eyes open on growing, flying, happening,
and go on opening...
Amazement is the thing.
Not love, but the astonishment of loving.

