

**Elizabethan Enrapturement  
On Shakespeare's Sonnet 24  
Cathedral Evensong  
9 August 2009**

Throughout this past week I have been trying to source the painter and the name of his subject whose beautiful face I see on high quality greeting cards from time to time. It is an Italian renaissance portrait, and you could rest content with just letting your eyes play over the exquisite contours of her face. But the more you gaze on her the more you become aware of the double edged presentation of this woman that the painter is bringing to our attention. For while she is undeniably a looker there is a degree of absence behind those eyes, as though we are being invited to consider that there is a certain interior lack of spirit and heart here. Then there is the slim little pet just inside the frame. Like its owner it is a sleek animal – nice to look at and to touch, but maybe what you see is what you get.

Is this what the author of Sonnet 24 is driving at – that sometimes what presents as lovely is not necessarily love worthy? Or is it a reflection on the difficulty the eye has in seeing or showing what lies in the heart – the challenge in getting past the form to the hidden depths beneath?

I have called this sermon Elizabethan Enrapturement as I consider the nature of beauty, in what is supposed to be a conversation about the passion and the tragedy of being human. For oh yes, beauty does matter to us, very much so!

In marriage preparation sessions I often ask, “What has drawn and attracted you to this person – why have you chosen this person out of all available humanity?” The men who give the answer for our

times, “She challenges me, she keeps me honest, she is a match for me,” receive a cautious, slightly puzzled approval. Whereas the men who reply, “Well, she is beautiful,” receive a radiant smile of appreciation.

Yet I am puzzled by the choice of Sonnet 24 as the launch point into this topic. Left to my own devices I would have turned to a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which, if taken to heart by the women of Christchurch, would put the beauticians of this city out of business.

In *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo* a beautiful woman is sitting in front of a mirror considering the damage that advancing age is doing to her good looks. The rhythm and the pace of the poem accelerate in tandem with her distress as she considers each detail of what is being lost, or being changed for the worse. In a pre Botox, cosmetic surgery age there is no going back to the what was of youth. So it is a matter of, “Be beginning to despair, to despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair.”

The counter movement in this poem pivots off the realization that there is a place where “whatever’s prized and passes of us, everything that’s fresh and fast flying of us...the flower of beauty, fleece of beauty...is fastened with the tenderest truth to its own best being and its loveliness of youth: it is an everlastingness of, O it is an all youth!” This is the moment of God disclosure – of theophany – of grateful, relieved, amazed insight that in God’s fully realized future world the most beautiful things about us are taken up and translated into the what will be of us. Armed with this grace filled illumination she is freed to age gracefully, to make an act of

surrender in which, “early now, long before death, Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty’s self and beauty’s giver.”

So part of the hope that we have as Christians is that there is a beauty about us that is stored up for the ages to come. What this amounts to is I think more than the hope that whatever good looks we had in this earthly life will be preserved, and even more vivaciously expressed in our resurrection bodies. Rather it is a reflection of the fact that we are made in the image of God. As Origen, strikingly said in a sermon of his, “The Son of God is the painter of this image.”

I love this phrase. It gets me imagining Jesus lovingly painting that particular and unique version of him that each one of us is. What a portrait that must be – each one of us recognisably who we are now, but lit up, reframed, and subtly recast as that attractive brother or sister of Christ that we were always meant to be. And Origen was optimistic about our destiny to grow into this strikingly attractive portrait. As he went on to say:

Because he (the Son of God) is such a great painter his image can be obscured by negligence; it cannot be destroyed by malice - For the image of God always remains, even if you yourself draw “the image of the earthly” over it in yourself.

When I hear things like this I begin to understand why beauty has always been such an important dimension of faith for me. I think I obscurely sensed right from the beginning that beauty is a key correspondence element between God and us. It is a link point of perception and experience that makes it possible for such radically different beings as the

Divine and the human to be drawn into relationship with one another.

As I reflect back on the inner dynamic of how faith began for me, the word that comes to mind is “enraptured.” I experienced a combination of aesthetic, emotional and intellectual enrapturement that drew me towards the splendour and the glory of God as it radiated out towards me. It was years later that I read Hans Urs Von Balthasar wonderful phrase that, “God is beautiful as the one who arouses pleasure, creates desire for himself, and rewards with delight,” – and I immediately thought – “Yes, that is how faith happened for me.”

I guess the Holy Spirit has as many ways as there are people to make God real, and to get them started in their walk of faith. But I don’t think I am alone in being drawn in by this particular approach route. I think that this is what happened also to many other believers, and I have come to believe that it is one of the primary ways God operates in the world. If we are serious about attracting people to faith in the Triune God then we need to pay attention to what one-commentator calls, “the loveliness of God, that quality which draws humanity close and makes the gospel good news.”

For we cant ignore the role of desire in motivating people to seek God’s presence and beauty. Right through the pages of the Bible we can see the recurring motifs of that enthusiasm and longing for the presence of God that gives faith an electric dimension in human experience. And desire is aroused in large measure by beauty.

I think too that this dimension of God’s loveliness has helped me to understand what is at the heart of our religion, and what a healthy faith consists of. I

think that Joseph Mangina got it in one when he wrote that, "God is of interest to us not because he is useful to us, but because he is supremely good and true and indeed beautiful." God wants to be loved for who he is in himself, and not just for what he gives. Of course God takes our needs and our requests seriously, but if our religion never moves beyond the "gimmee, gimmee, gimmee," attitude then a distortion will creep into the way we love God. Prayer, while allowing lots of scope for our requests and petitions, is essentially a relationship developing activity, rather than a cargo cult delivery system. That is why adoration and gratitude are key building blocks in our evolving relationship with God.

It is why worship is so important. I would define worship as "a movement towards God in love and praise." You worship whom you love. The old Prayer book Wedding Service got it right when it said "with my body I thee worship." Adoring God in ritual patterns of movement, music and cadences of life giving language is the name of the game of what is supposed to go on in churches. How I am weary of being made to take part in acts of ecological concientization at the hands of liberal Christians who seem to have lost that key dimension of worship as an encounter with the mystery and the wonder and the awe inspiring beauty of God, which then energises us to go out into the world and be eco warriors, if that is our enthusiasm. How I despair of "Meetings," as Services modelled on the pattern of what goes on in the Anglican diocese of Sydney are called, that are long Bible teaching sessions without any sense of doxological intent, since apparently in this way of looking at the world we are not able to offer God anything.

Which brings me to the action points of this sermon. If we take the loveliness and the beauty of God seriously, or should I say playfully, then there is I think an obligation on us to avoid dull, image-less and unattractive Christianity. That means avoiding kitsch in interior Church décor. It involves avoiding schmaltz in forms of worship, and in ways of talking about God, particularly from the pulpit.

Sentimentality and moralism are a debased coinage for talking about the Divine presence. Stunts and gimmicks are no substitute for prayerful, well-done liturgy. Listen to these words of Henri de Lubac:

The ... Liturgy is luminous in its very mysteries, balanced and reposeful in its very magnificence, it is well ordered, and even that which calls most strongly to our being at the level of the senses comes by its meaning only through faith.

What I understand by this is that the liturgy is a gift from God to the Church, the classic form for worship, the best vehicle for bringing a Christian community into life giving contact with the luminous presence of God.

Sometimes resources are few, and mission imperatives mean we must take what we can find as suitable places for worship. But increasingly converted industrial buildings seem to be the de rigueur Kiwi places of worship. How can the presence of God take up residence in such sound deadened, aesthetically etiolated buildings? I cant help noticing how many phone calls Anglican parishes field from young women from such churches who are about to get married.

I want to be fair and clear about this. Sometimes Christians from a Puritan tradition accuse Cathedral type Christians of running Services that amount to a

concert hall experience, in which the ear and the eye are entranced without any sense of sincere and direct engagement with God. It is perfectly possible to do this, in just the same way that some of our intelligentsia and aesthetically inclined middle class make life into a continuous arts festival experience as a substitute for the worship of the living God.

So here let me add an important caveat here about what I mean by Divine beauty. Von Balthasar said, "If we seek Christ's beauty in a glory which is not that of the crucified we seek it in vain. In this self revelation God's beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call ugly as well as what we call beautiful." There is material here for an entire sermon in itself, but I am as keen as you are to get home at a decent hour. So I will just make this point. Jesus habitually seeks out the place of maximum God forsakenness in the world, and by taking up residence there changes it by degrees through his humble, kind presence into the place of Divine glory. He descended to the dead, as the creed says. The trajectory of the risen Jesus includes a journey to the underworld of imprisoned souls in their half-life in Hades. Or as Christchurch Anglicans could say, we acknowledge his beautiful presence at evening meal time at the City Mission, as much as here at Evensong in this Cathedral.

While we are on the subject of astringent correctives this theme of Elizabethan Enrapturement has reminded me of how keenly our Elizabethan ancestors contended strongly to keep God at the centre of their church life. Out of this struggle the Church of England as we now more or less know it was born. And if you have found God to be an enrapturing presence, the most beautiful thing in

the world, then that is the place you will want him to have in the Church too.

I mention this because sometimes I think we have become enamoured with lesser beauties in the life of the Church. The last few decades have seen us greatly taken with a number of contemporary enthusiasms that have often deflected us from what we are supposed to be mostly about. We have been keen to embrace whatever the spirit of the age has thrown up for fear that if we don't we will appear to be left behind, not cool, not relevant and meaningful. But ask yourself what is it that the Church has to offer, to add, to the benefit of humankind that no other organisation or service delivery provider can? The answer is God – God himself – the beautiful, enrapturing Triune God.

So if we want to make ourselves useful to others in the most helpful way possible we could become acquainted with the ways of this lovely and love worthy God. This has implications for the way we think about, and teach about God. I believe that theology is thinking God's thoughts after him; it is about applying rationality to the mystery of God's presence in the world. So it is not helpful to start with the human subject, to get lost in special interest agendas that date oh so quickly.

In prayer and worship and in theological reflection the business at hand is contemplating the Divine being with holy joy. We will spend all eternity doing this, so we might as well start now. God is what is interesting, fascinating, beautiful – we are not – or rather we not nearly as much those wonderful things. We are a moon to his sun. Our beauty is a pale reflection of God's beauty.

So we can stop worrying about our fading good looks. When God is at the centre of the Church's life, when God has pride of place in our life, then things fall into place, a life giving perspective develops, in which it is safe for us to gaze into a full-length mirror without having a panic attack.