



Scenes from the Old Testament

Susanna and the Elders

6 March 2016

The Dean of St Edmundsbury

Daniel 13

*The man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass, and then the heavens espy.*

The stained glass in St Edmundsbury Cathedral is largely Victorian – good quality, of course; but not the old mediaeval images that throughout Suffolk were destroyed by William Dowsing and his iconoclastic crew in the seventeenth century. They rampaged through village and church, smashing that which was idolatrous to their eyes, seeking the purity of clear glass, unadulterated by corrupting images, to mediate the pure gospel, now revealed in plain English.

At the Cathedral one window remains of mediaeval origin. You'll see it as you enter, straight ahead of you, in the South West corner. The bottom half shows the story of Susanna and the elders, or judges, who falsely accuse her of adultery. It's a story from the thirteenth chapter of Daniel, which you'll find in the Apocrypha, that selection of books that isn't found in Protestant versions – literally, the hidden Bible.

Nevertheless, it's a story that is familiar throughout the history of visual art. It gave artists the opportunity to please their patrons, after all, with a biblical character, a very delicate woman and beautiful to behold, suggestively, provocatively portrayed, washing herself, naked. A virtuous, married woman; her virtue and unattainability intensifying her allure, of course. A story for the responsible elders of any age: a reminder to keep their attention pure, even as they are titivated; not to succumb to the temptations of lust, of easy gratification. For it can corrupt you, as it did those elders who compromised Susanna, forcing an innocent woman to decide between rape and death.

As we look on the window – through the ages – we become the voyeurs, with lessons to learn about ourselves.

About ten days ago Dame Janet Smith's report came into the public domain. Her investigation into the action – or lack of it – of the BBC during the years of Savile and Hall; how they hid behind their celebrity, as the elders hid behind their reputation. No one dared to question them; complaints, pain, distress all hidden from the eyes of the world. The countless girls and boys that were abused, as they came – innocent and full of excitement – to appear on the TV with this hero figure who fulfilled their dreams, to find it was a web of lies, a web in which they were caught, unable to speak the incredible truth. A whole institutional

culture, so manipulated that it was deaf and blind to what was going on and the extent of the abuse. Such a culture of complicity – perhaps ignorance – that for decades both men got away with it. They were beyond question, beyond reproach, behind a smokescreen through which no eye passed.

Imagine yourself into the mind of Savile. What was going on for him as countless people watched him? I remember how he performed, week after week, playing his role, as those elderly judges did. How innocent the interchange seemed with these youngsters, while really he was anticipating what would happen next. His attention so corrupted by his desire that he had lost any self-control – lost his moral compass that might have told him how wrong, evil, his desires had become.

And the two elders saw her going in every day, and walking in her husband's garden; so that their lust was inflamed toward her. And they perverted their own mind, and turned away their eyes, that they might not look unto heaven, nor remember just judgments.

Susanna is accused, and her family is taken in. The head of her husband, Joacim, filled with mischievous imagination against her. Had we been part of the culture of the BBC in the 1970s, what would we have seen? Would we have seen the truth?

As we look at the window, what do we see? It's not a clear story. The window has been re-constructed from fragments. It's a jumbled image of an ancient story from the hidden bible. What we see, and fail to see – either in a glass window, in the text, in culture around us, or in the person before us – should always concern us.

Within traditional religious orders you'll hear of the discipline *custodia oculorum* – custody of the eyes, a training of our attention, the gaze. Prayerfully, we seek the truth of God amidst that which is hidden, amidst the jumbled and confused images of life. We ask of what we see: Are we being taken in? Where does the truth lie? Do we have ears and eyes to see beyond appearance? to train our eyes on God and the things of God? *Custodia oculorum*.

Matthew Crawford, in *The World Beyond your Head*, argues that we need to train our attention so that we are not taken in. He writes that we are very sophisticated, and very sophisticated are the ways we can be dominated by that to which we give our attention. He commends the development of ways of knowing that keep us, literally, in touch with the world beyond our heads, the material world, the world of other people and their claims. Much knowledge today is in our heads, he argues, a virtual non-reality that fosters fantasies, mischievous imaginations, images that gratify. We are seduced by powerful forces that commodify the experiences we come to crave, and make them marketable. He calls such experiences hyper-palatable: our attention fed but not satisfied by so many aspects of the culture in which we are embedded. And so our decision-making processes are manipulated by sophisticated advertising. We find it difficult to give concentrated attention. We are easily distracted, thinly gratified. Before we know it, our moral compass starts to spin.

How to learn self-control in the face of temptation? Crawford cites the now famous marshmallow test. You'll know it, most probably: six-year-old children were given the opportunity of having one marshmallow immediately or, if they were able to wait fifteen minutes until the researcher returned, two. Left alone with the marshmallow at hand,

some gobbled it immediately, others after a brief struggle. About a third deferred gratification – they were able to distract themselves from the marshmallow by playing games under the table, singing songs, imagining the marshmallow as a cloud; guarding it against those who want to steal it. The children who developed strategies to resist temptation, follow-up research has shown, have done significantly better in life. One small child, disturbingly, waited until the researcher had left the room, and then took the marshmallow and carefully scooped out the contents before returning the shell to look as though it were intact. Would Savile have done that? Or the judges?

What to take away from this? Perhaps to attend more carefully to our attention.
Custodia oculorum.

Crawford argues that we need to attend to the world beyond our heads, so that we engage not with self-gratification, but so we are aware and open to other people and their real needs; to the material world that offers resistance to us, and makes us know things; and attending to second-order desires, which are worthier of us. This means we acquire tastes that are not immediately accessible and higher order knowledge that helps us judge critically, to know what is good and true. This, for Crawford, is an education for life; an education that gives us ears to hear, eyes to see. So we are not taken in, or seduced by mischievous imaginings. We can decide what to attend to, as we develop our moral self, the self that can discern what is good, true and beautiful from the jumbled images of life. To attend, in music, prayer and meditation, to the God of love is a proven way to take us out of ourselves and ground us where we need to be to flourish in life.

The iconoclasts of the seventeenth century worked hard to ensure all the churches of Suffolk had only clear glass that would not corrupt. They were motivated, I suggest, by a naïf understanding of the human person. We deceive ourselves if we imagine with the Puritans that we can simply remove temptations by smashing them. To pretend that all is transparent to the human soul is to invite other, deeper impulses to take hold on the back of a false security and self-righteousness. We are immediately susceptible to other temptation. What did the Desert Father fear would be the last words he heard as he died? The devil whispering in his ear, “You have done well!”

We need to see and hear the temptations, within ourselves and of this world, to understand them, and to decide to attend to other things – to God, and the people around us who need our careful and thoughtful love.

The same seventeenth century held also the wisdom of George Herbert with whose words I began:

The man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass, and then the heavens espy.

There is a new font in the Church at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield. It's beautiful. It's full of water all the time, in which you can see your reflection. Each baptism, when the water is disturbed as the person enters, the image fragments, only to enable a new self to emerge from the deep waters of death, in the name of the Trinity. As Susanna next bathed in her husband's garden, perhaps she too saw a deeper truth as her eye passed through the water, as her body was cleansed of the smear of the elders, and restored to innocence.