



Faith in the Arts

4 March 2018

Pim Baxter

Ecclesiastes 5: 1-7 Philippians 4: 4-9

Good evening, I am delighted to be here in this wonderful Chapel and my thanks to the Acting Dean for inviting me to speak to you about 'Faith in the Arts'.

When I was first invited to take part in this series of Lent talks I mentioned it to one of my team at the National Portrait Gallery, Melanie, a bright young lady in her thirties, and asked her, "How do you think I bring faith into working in the arts?" Her immediate response was "You don't, thank goodness!" She must have seen the expression on my face and quickly countered it by saying, "Actually, you do in the way you set an example to us all, and how you encourage and support us." This was more like the answer I wanted to hear!

However, it made me think about exactly how I did bring my faith into the workplace. Was the way I conducted myself in my working life based on my Christian beliefs, and what difference did it make that I worked in the arts? If I were to think of the challenges and opportunities faced by a person of faith working in the arts, my instinctive response would be why should these challenges be any different from working anywhere else?

I am blessed in having been able to work in an arts environment for over 30 years, beginning with opera, then theatre, with 8 years at the National Theatre, and for the last 20 years in the visual arts at the National Portrait Gallery. You are working so much of the time with talented individuals who can be demanding and sometimes irrational – occasionally they can try your patience. They are also creative, charming, and inspirational. The arts world can be a challenge for artists, performers, musicians, singers and many others, often involving long hours, insecurity and rejection. For those of us involved in running arts organisations there is the challenge of funding constantly in the background.

If I think about what brings my faith together with my working life in the arts, two words come to mind and these are *nurture* – to care and protect someone while they are developing, and *nourishment* – the 'food' necessary for growth and health.

Melanie's words made me think about all those inspirational individuals that have nurtured me throughout my career and allowed me to develop in an amazingly creative environment, and I hope that I might have done the same for those who have worked with me. I also hope that in doing so I have followed some of the advice given in the two lessons read earlier, the passage from Ecclesiastes and particularly the one from St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians:

whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

In Matthew Chapter 25 verse 15, the parable of the talents, Jesus encourages each of the servants *to act according to his several ability*. We are each given something we are good at and we should make the most of it. The arts are testimony to the talent that God has given to every individual, a skill that is unique to them and allows, for example, an artist to create a painting or a sculpture, which we can admire for its sheer skill and talent, or a photographer to capture a special moment.

I constantly marvel in my current role at how portrait artists can create such a striking likeness of an individual or even indeed of themselves – to the point that you can see what their character might be even if you do not know them. For those of us who do not have that ability it is extraordinary.

A musician, a singer or an actor will have the opportunity to work with other talented individuals to bring something memorable to an audience, be it an opera, a symphony, a choral work, a play that transports the audience to another world, or helps them to gain a greater insight into the subject matter – or simply to enjoy. Theatres, opera houses, concert halls, music venues, galleries and indeed cathedrals and churches provide an opportunity for the arts to flourish and to provide nourishment for our senses, a gateway to inspiration, creativity and even healing.

More and more the arts is seen as being a positive force for health and well-being, from building confidence in young people and helping them interact with others, to having a positive effect on the elderly, the bereaved or the sick.

The National Portrait Gallery for many years has worked with Great Ormond Street Hospital and children, some who may be terminally ill, many who are going to be there for quite some time. It is the most humbling and yet life-enhancing experience to watch them engrossed in a piece of work; perhaps making a collage about their life, or creating their own self-portrait or drawing their family. One minute they are doing this and the next they are collected to go off for their treatment. These moments can challenge your faith but can also be an inspiration; these children are an example to us all.

In the words from Isaiah Chapter 40 verse 28: The Lord is the everlasting God. He gives strength to the weary and increases the powers of the weak. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like angels.

For me personally, apart from the joy of working in a creative world, there are those moments that nourish my faith because of how they make me feel – it might be the overture to an opera, a beautiful work of art, or a familiar hymn. I might see a painting that will exactly capture a particular moment for me, as for example Caravaggio's *The Betrayal of Christ* or Constable's *Christ blessing bread and wine*. We are coming up to that time of the year when there will be many performances of one of the Passions. Listening to Bach's music and the journey leading up to the crucifixion and Easter never fails to be re-affirming for me – and I am sure for others.

For the past four years, I have been a Lay Canon at St Paul's Cathedral. Of course, the Cathedral itself is a testimony to the talents of Sir Christopher Wren. It is an awesome and special place for so many reasons, not least because all around you is a wealth of art,

from the wonderful mosaics to more contemporary work such as the two Bill Viola video installation pieces – the *Martyrs* and *Mary*. The closing imagery in *Mary*, of the Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ, has a particular meaning for me as the Michelangelo Pieta is one of those works of art that made a deep impression on me when I first saw the sculpture many years ago in St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

Our imagination can play an important part in how we respond to God and the way we visualise our beliefs. There is a passage in Bernard Shaw's play *St Joan* which gives reference to the belief that it is through imagination that we can glimpse a sacred perspective. At the beginning of the play Joan is speaking to the squire, Captain Robert de Baudricourt, the first person of rank to be persuaded by her plans:

Joan: "I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God."

Robert: "They come from your imagination."

Joan: "That is how the messages of God come to us."

Imagination can be stimulated by the arts and staying with theatre, there is one particular moment from my time at the National Theatre where the words from a play had a profound emotional effect on me and what I believe. It is from *Racing Demon*, one of the David Hare trilogy about three different British institutions, and focuses on the Church of England, which finds itself in the play attracting unwanted publicity. At the end of the play, there are some particularly poignant lines. Indeed Richard Eyre, a former Director of the National Theatre, read them at the memorial service in Westminster Abbey for Mary Soames, who had been the theatre's Chairman. They seem to capture for me a glimpse of that last moment before we depart this life for the next one to come.

I love that bit where the plane begins to climb, the ground smooths away behind you, the buildings, the hills. Then the white patches. The vision gets bleary. The cloud becomes a hard shelf. The land is still there. But all you see is white and the horizon.

And then you turn and head towards the sun.

The arts have nurtured and nourished me as a person and made me who I am, and at the same time given me opportunities to affirm my faith by appreciating so much amazing talent around me. I hope I have brought to the workplace some of what I have learned and heard and seen along the way about the ethos of being a Christian.