Religious art at Farm Street

Talk given on Friday 28th April 2017 by Francis Hoyland

1.

I was flattered to be asked to give a talk about religious art at Farm Street. Anyone would be. Many thanks to our hosts of the Society of Jesus.

I have spent decades dwelling on the art of the past as much as, or more than, the art of the present. But I am no art historian. I will not try your patience with my thoughts on the Counter Reformation. Nor am I a journalist. I will not discuss the commercial galleries. Instead, since it is the only thing I can talk about with any real authority, I will talk about my own practice as an artist and teacher. That is both long-standing and still developing.

First I will talk about my experience of working from observation, and second from imagination.

2.

When I draw from life I sit down, hold a pencil, fidget with the paper, gaze at my subject. At first I am appalled at the difficulty of the situation. These things

are so different: paper, pencil, my model and myself. It seems almost an affront to the nature of things to attempt to realise a recognisable, three dimensional form on that flat piece of paper.

Nevertheless the sweep of a shoulder attracts my attention. I find I am making a gesture with my pencil somewhere on the open field of the paper. I gaze and find myself led to the recognition of another rhythmic feature that seems to have a mysterious connection with the first.

As the process continues, I notice that willy-nilly I am making a pattern of flat marks on the paper's surface that can be said to define a shape. I look up and see a shape of much the same nature in the model. This shape might fall between two limbs or within one of them or anywhere else. It can't *really* exist because the model exists as a form in space. Nonetheless the shape has length and breadth.

I proceed with my drawing which is related to a picture plane through which rays of light are assumed to pass. The picture plane is an idea, a flat surface in space, through which I view my subject. It is also the surface of my paper, on which I am drawing. The points at which the rays of light pass through the picture plane can be related and even measured. Really the picture plane is an abstraction which I do not consciously consider. Or it is a rationalisation, which I also ignore.

It is not only the model I am drawing. It is the whole sweep of space around and about her and myself. Rilke puts it well when he says: ‘Space spreads surroundingly from us to things.’

3.

What has happened?

A drawing, certainly, but perhaps more importantly, an experience of different things that have much in common. A unity that is symbolised for me by the rectangle of paper. Maybe I have realised a metaphor in which different things are not said to be *like* each other, but are more mysteriously stated to share in or have a common denominator.

Metaphor.

Blake’s sick rose was not a girl. But there she is in a few lines of verse, although she is never mentioned.

‘O Rose thou art sick.

The invisible worm,

That flies in the night

In the howling storm:

‘Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy:

And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy.’

Fr Gerald Manley Hopkins ends his greatest poem, which deals with both the fragility and permanent existence of our souls, with three words. He does not say that a soul is *like* a diamond, but that a soul ‘is immortal diamond.’

For a Catholic the king of all metaphors – or the transcendent metaphor – is the Blessed Sacrament. Something that effects what it is an image of, a reality indeed. Something whose appearance clothes ultimate reality.

What I have been trying to do is glean a meaning from the process of drawing. Apparently drawing is a metaphor. Lines on the paper stand for something much more significant.

And apparently different things are experienced in such a way that they point to a common existence within which they are held. I dare to say that, as an artist,

my task is to meditate on separate things in such a way that I sense the context in which they and everything else are held.

I sometimes dare to hope that in this way I have a kind of back-door glimpse into the all-holding mind of Almighty God.

4.

But I have not said why I want to draw one thing rather than another. The real and simple answer to this is given by Fr Hopkins' doctrine of instress. But in my case this instress, which Hopkins felt as something immediate and compelling, starts as a dim light which grows brighter as I go on drawing.

This initial impulse is more a moment of recognition than anything else. I recognise a certain configuration as having meaning (not verbal but experienced). Almost anything can start me off.

I remember Constable saying 'I never saw an ugly thing in all my life.'

Indeed as I move around a class I am presented with different aspects of the same model, each of which I am usually able to empathise with, and to draw myself. Empathy is but another aspect of the experience of unity I have mentioned.

If they work sincerely – I find they always do – my students make marks on paper which are statements of reality. I recognise it because, whatever it may be, reality is something we have in common.

Incidentally a drawing or painting can seem more real than the world that we observe. If you go to the National Gallery and look at the Masaccio Madonna, an experience I first had in the years just after World War II, you may see an outstanding example of this. I think I am right in saying this picture was painted nearly six hundred years ago.

5.

All that I have said so far has been concerned with the practice of drawing *from* something.

By implication I have tried to suggest that a great deal of artistic activity consciously or unconsciously becomes a form of meditation which can be offered to Almighty God. I am implying that it is a mistake to make too hard and fast a distinction between sacred and profane art. The relative sanctity of an artist's work comes from the degree with which it is offered up, rather than from its overt subject matter.

However I do try to make images that directly illustrate the Gospel account of Our Lord's doings. In fact this is a large part of my practice.

I know that a travelling scholarship to Italy years ago had a deep effect on me. There I found so many versions of Our Lord's life, and so many images of his childhood held in the arms of Our Holy Mother that I think I was inspired with the need to somehow follow suit. It gradually became obvious to me that I found no other stories to be so full of meaning, or had so deep an effect on me.

Italian painting, architecture and sculpture seemed to contain something that amplified and sometimes contradicted the way of drawing I had been taught by a dedicated band of pragmatic naturalists in England – who were mainly hostile (or indifferent) to Christian revelation.

There in Italy I felt that I could believe. A seed was planted that grew until it led me into the Church years afterwards. I was, I suppose, converted by Italian Art.

6.

When I read, pictures form in my mind. Sometimes these pictures are clear enough to draw. But I can reinforce these mental images systematically by following a programme of meditation on the Ignatian model. Where did the event happen? If in a house, how was it furnished and roofed? If outside, what was the landscape like? Who was there? What were they wearing? And so on.

This process may be followed but something else happens as well. To explain this, I will take a scene from my usual Rosary meditations – from in fact the

Mysteries of Light. The third of these mysteries is about the Preaching of the the Kingdom.

The first Hail Mary in the decade I use to imagine the place in which Our Lord preached the Sermon on the Mount; and the remaining nine are taken up by each of the Beatitudes (the last one can be divided in two and counts as one image). The image of each Beatitude for me is a person.

I will now attempt to describe the course of a painting I have just, I think – I never quite know – finished. You can find the image on the cards which hopefully have been distributed.

The first picture that came into my mind was concerned with the beautiful ‘Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.’ The purity to which I rather desperately attempt to attain became a woman and by gazing at Our Lord she is actually ‘seeing God.’

Christ is rhythmically connected with her but He is following an internal movement which is symbolised by a rising peak above him. Then, in turn, each Beatitude became personalised until all eight were present about the summit on which Our Lord stands. This all began as a drawing made while sitting in my rather dreadful armchair one evening.

7.

Cézanne once said ‘distances, distances, that’s what makes a painter.’ I often recognise the truth of these words. In the case of my painting of the Sermon on the Mount, distance equals mystery. When I had squared up the drawing and began to paint I knew that I had to imagine distance as a series of closely related tones, and that they represented a spiritual ascension.

I also knew that I would have to rely on depth rather than on surface light. That is, I must keep the paint as transparent as possible so that it did not clog up.

I knew that the rising clouds in the sky that moved from left to right were associated with the same aspiration as the mountain above and behind Our Lord; and that in them the prayer of Our Lord was modulated and integrated with the prayers of Our Lady exemplified by the Hail Marys of the Rosary.

Some mountaineer will certainly tell me that mountains do not look like that. But I will reply ‘How do you know what my mountains look like, for you cannot see into my mind. Fr Hopkins spoke true when he told us that the “mind has mountains.” ’

Transparent paint, spiritual aspiration, people as real as I can get them, depth, subdued sunlight, distances, love and prayer.

As for clothing I am afraid I have no interest in clothes as such but I do need blocks of colour. I certainly do not see the Gospel in modern dress so I settle for tunics that can be any colour that suits me. This colour should emerge from a common matrix of subdued tones.

8.

I have not mentioned the various accidents, mistakes and encounters through which I have had to negotiate a passage through art and life. Somehow it seems to me that all these failures add up to something and that I have been assisted, and even led, through what now appear to be necessary failures and defeats.

Fr Jean-Pierre de Caussade tells how we start out in one direction but find ourselves travelling in another; think we are doing something but accidentally find ourselves doing something else. This is remarkably true to what I have lived through and accurately describes how I paint, brush mark by brush mark.

‘Veni Creator Spiritus.’

‘All shall be well.’

I hope these few words show why I think that art, depending on motivation of course, tends to be a spiritual meditation, or at least has a great deal in common with spiritual meditation. And the overtly religious subject matter of many of my own paintings is only one example of the explicit inspiration that faith can offer.

I have tried to show there is a both a process of conscious thought, and of something like random development when I draw and paint. The artists here tonight will be familiar with the doctrine of the happy error. For non-artists this means you make a mistake but it is the right thing to do for the picture.

The access to reality that drawing and painting provide is an access to creation quite different to that which operates in normal life. It can be like prayer, or can be prayer. The same applies to other forms of creative activity of course.

I promised not to make remarks about commercial galleries. But I could conclude with the observation that for any future existence of the pictures ‘For us there is only the trying, the rest is not our business.’

But not quite conclude since since I feel I must end with two quotations from Jacques Maritain. The practice of art for a Christian, he writes, is difficult:

‘difficulty squared, because it is difficult to be an artist and very difficult to be a Christian, and because the whole difficulty is not merely the sum but the product of these two difficulties multiplied by one another, for it is a question of reconconciling two absolutes.’

And more frighteningly:

‘There are no rules for giving an artistic object the value of a religious emotion. This depends on a certain interior freedom in regard to rules. It can be achieved only by not being directly pursued, and by the artist sharing, in one way or another, in the spiritual life of the saints.’

Help!