

Celebrating Sacred Art

The Festival of Sacred Arts at the Fringe

St Vincent's Church, Edinburgh

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EXTRACT

Jesus speaks of himself as the bread of life. He develops this image in two further ways – this is the bread come down from heaven, and it's bread that signifies his flesh given for the life of the world.

Readers of John's Gospel would have been familiar with the story of the Last Supper, and the manner in which the bread represents the body of Christ as the sacramental meal is shared in the church. What are we to make of this on a Sunday when we celebrate an arts festival?

We might begin by noting that heaven can only be described in the language of earth. Our only vocabulary is the one that we have learned from childhood and it enables us to adapt and reassign expressions and image from a familiar context to one that is different.

The story of Jesus shows how the reception of God's activity takes place through sensible forms – the water of baptism, the bread and wine of communion. These are accessible to our five senses, yet they communicate the mystery of the gospel and enable us to know the presence of God in our midst.

There is no bare experience of God – always it is in, with and through some medium that is available to our senses.

One of my predecessors, John Baillie is best known for his *Diary of Private Prayer*. But he wrote another significant book entitled *Our Knowledge of God*. There he said that our awareness of God is always in, with and under other presences. He identified three in particular – the world of nature, other people, and the story of Jesus. God encounters us immediately, he claimed, but always through some other presence. He might have added art as another medium. So much of what moves us to a deeper awareness of ourselves, our world and God is artistic in expression – a painting, a poem or a song can all function in this way. It's one reason why we need our artists, poets and musicians.

In some traditions, particularly the Russian Orthodox, much has been made of the sacramental quality of the entire creation. The presence of the transcendent God can be manifest to us in and through each created thing. Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, shared the same vision – 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God, it will shock out like shining foil' – an electrifying image. The sacraments of the church are intense focal ways in which this happens, but other created forms can also bring a powerful awareness of the Spirit.

For many people today art has replaced the power of religion to communicate a sense of the transcendent or to offer some insight into our human condition. Considered in this way, art and religion are closely related and we do well when we recognise that they can serve one another. I suspect that's one reason why attendances at cathedral worship around the UK are showing a significant increase. Church buildings, stained glass, furnishings, bells, the liturgy, hymns, anthems and songs are all carefully designed to communicate through our senses something of the mystery, power and presence of Christ in our midst, the bread of life come down from heaven.

Music has a vital role to play in the act of worship; it has a capacity to take words from Scripture or prayer and to present these to our hearing in ways that make them memorable and moving. John Calvin is sometimes taken to have been hostile to the arts, but he recognised the power of music to communicate the faith. So he urged his people to sing the psalms of the faith not just in church, but in their homes and out in the fields while they were working. This way the words of Scripture would take hold and impress themselves upon the heart:

'For a linnet, a nightingale or a popinjay will sing well, but it will be without understanding. But our proper gift is to sing, knowing what we say - so we have the song imprinted on our memory never to cease singing it.'

Music has been integral to the renewal of the church on many occasions. The final corporate act of the disciples with Jesus was to sing a hymn. The church followed suit.

The hymns of Luther were succeeded by the music of Bach, Methodism was born through song with several of the hymns of Charles Wesley have become classics of the world church, the liturgical reforms of the Scottish Presbyterian church began here in Edinburgh in the mid-19th century and brought about the introduction of a hymn book, pipe organs, church choirs as well as a return to stained glass – in this last respect, the Scottish Episcopal Church had already led the way.

Finally, back to where we started – the bread of life come down from heaven. We need to recollect that this was a striking image in its context. The serene and detached divinity of the ancient world is here described as taking the form of flesh and blood for our sake.

God comes amongst us, stooping down to our material and fragile condition. This is the theme of John's Gospel. Although it's described as the spiritual gospel, it's also richly material. Speech is a vehicle of communication, sight is restored, touch brings healing, the bread is to be tasted, the costly perfume has an intense fragrance. All the senses are engaged.

Jesus is the carpenter's son, the friend of sinners, the teacher and healer who is lifted up on his cross. The Word made flesh, he dwells amongst us full of grace and truth, and so calls forth our praise and celebration today with all the created gifts that we can muster.