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The Gospel and Pictorial Art.

WHEN we consider the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our thoughts are almost invariably concerned with the written record and the spoken word. Good news comes to us usually through the printed page and the human voice. He who would know the mind of Christ must search the Scriptures, and he who would feel the fullest glow of inspiration must meet with his fellows in corporate worship and find in the language of devotion a means of grace. In this way the sacrament of the sermon is of great importance, as Free Churchmen have realised throughout the last three hundred years. The proclamation of the Gospel by word of mouth is the distinctive emphasis of the Free Churches. If the function of preaching is neglected they may reasonably expect to find their witness impaired and their usefulness considerably curtailed. All is not lost if the sermon be poor; but much is gained if the preacher possess the truly prophetic accent.

All this, and much more, may be said in favour of the purely verbal expression of the Gospel. Yet preaching and hearing are not the only complementary activities of the mind. The language of the Gospel can never be confined within the limits of the alphabet. Words—written, read or spoken—convey much; but they cannot travel along all the highways of the heart. There are vast emotional areas outside which they must always remain. It is within these areas that pictorial art is a familiar pilgrim, reaching heights and depths of personality otherwise untouched.

It has been suggested by some that any kind of visual presentation is alien to the genius of the Gospel; that its message may be much more effectively conveyed through the ear by the larynx; that a good song well sung is a better evangelistic agency than a good picture well painted; that art can have no other than a baneful influence on the awakening soul; and, finally, that these things don't matter, and it is rather foolish to discuss them. Others have too often confused art with a certain type of philosophical aestheticism which makes the enjoyment of beauty for its own sake the supreme end. As Jung writes: "Aestheticism is not fitted to solve the exceedingly serious and difficult problem of the education of man; for it always presupposes the very things it should create, namely the capacity for the love of beauty. . . . Aestheticism, therefore, lacks all moral motive power, because *au fond* it is only refined hedonism." Now if we take the view that art in general—and pictorial art in particular—receives its final philosophical interpretation through this exposition of aestheticism, we have no alternative but to accept the dictum and

dismiss the subject. It is the purpose of this essay to question such a view and to affirm that the history of the relation of the Gospel to pictorial art effectually denies it.

The most cogent argument against the use of the picture to illustrate the Gospel is to be found in the protest of the Puritans against all forms of visual presentation of the things of the spirit. The clear eye of Calvin saw the danger of the aesthetic snare. Preaching, music and poetry were of the spirit: they had no embodiment in physical things apart from the creative personality moved by the Divine Afflatus. Painting, image, mural decoration, and any attempt to picture the Gospel were gross and of the earth; and in the struggle the earth would win. Idolatry loomed large on Calvin's spiritual horizon. Humanism did not save him from this fear. In his suspicion of pictorial art, Calvin was in direct descent from Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine. Puritanism was not a new movement when Calvin was born. There had always been the danger of enmeshing the things of the spirit in the cloying sweetness of the flesh, of weakening man's acknowledgment of the Sovereignty of God; and there had always been those who protested. Whether the Puritan's interpretation of the material universe and its relation to spiritual truth can survive in the light of the greater scientific knowledge of to-day is debatable. We acknowledge our indebtedness to them, but realise, in some measure, where they failed. Their suspicion of art suggests a Hebrew cast of mind reminiscent of the Old Covenant.

We have yet adequately to estimate the power of tradition and environment in the moulding of the form in which the Gospel is presented to the world in the literature of the New Testament, and also in the determining of the character of the men through whom it was produced. Even the casual reader will recognise the influence of the Old Testament on the thought-forms of the writers of the synoptic gospels and John. If he is in doubt, he can no longer remain so as he reads the letters of Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and that to the Hebrews. The New Israel is also a son of Abraham. The Gospel in the world owes its form to the Hebrews, its personality to God through Jesus Christ.

The ancient Hebrews were remarkable for their independence of artistic expression in the development of religious consciousness. In poetry and music alone did they excel. Certainly through these media they were artists in their portrayal of the Beauty of Holiness. In architecture, the plastic arts and ornament, they were singularly absorptive of the creative ideas of their neighbours. While we have Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonish and Persian art reaching a high state of culture, the Hebrews were content to copy prevailing patterns. They have not be-

queathed to us any distinctive monument, not even a temple or synagogue ruin, that can be deciphered as a specimen of a school, for the very good reason that there was not a school at any time in their varied and wonderful history. Of pictorial art we have no trace, although one of the principal sources of our knowledge of contemporary peoples is in picture language. It can only be assumed that the Hebrews relied upon their more artistic neighbours to supply them with any illustrative matter they might require.

This power of absorption is one of the heritable qualities which Christianity has received from its natural parent, and in nothing is this more evident than in its use of pictorial art as a vehicle for the expression of vital truth. The early Christians accepted uncritically the standards existing in the pagan world around them.

When Christianity was driven underground by persecution, pictorial art developed not merely as an adjunct to worship, but as a necessary language. "Until the edict of Constantine legalising Christianity its rites were, at least in the West, practised in private, largely in secret, and the language of symbols took on an increased importance where persecution so often followed open speech" (A. D. F. Hamlin, *History of Ornament*, p. 188). The various symbols of the catacombs and earliest church buildings mark the beginnings of Christian art. They were the shorthand of the Gospel which necessity forced upon those who dared not openly acknowledge Christ. They were understood by the few, but revealed nothing to the many. In our day we are apt to look upon these symbols as ornamentation, much in the way as the decorative artist may obtain his motif from Egyptian hieroglyph or Greek choreography. The definite attempt to visualise the Gospel is seen in such symbols as the fish, a graphic way of declaring the essence of the faith, taking the letters of the Greek word for fish as the initials of "Jesus Christ the Son of God, Saviour." The same idea is carried on in all the contractions familiar to us whereby the Christians of the first few centuries, especially at a time of persecution, preserved the essential teaching of the Gospel and handed it on to later generations. Thus, occasionally, do we see the equal-armed cross after the Greek fashion, and the still rarer form of the Latin cross with the elongated upright and shorter *stauros*.

These earliest attempts to portray the Gospel in line and colour are interesting because of their reference to the generally established canons of art in the pagan world around the Christian Church. As William Booth did not believe in the devil having all the best tunes, so the early Christians did not allow the pagans to retain all the best forms of pictorial presentation. Thus in

portraying Christ as the Good Shepherd they did not hesitate to borrow the depiction of the god Hermes bearing a ram on his shoulders (Hermes Kriophoros), a familiar representation to their non-Christian neighbours. The cypress tree is borrowed from Greek and Roman symbolism, and is used freely to represent death, especially the death and burial of baptism. Angels are reminiscent of Roman genii, and cherubs are distinctly Bacchic in form, wreaths, festoons, all suggest usages illustrative of other and alien religious ideas. In most of the cubicula—or family burial places—of the catacombs are to be seen frescoes representing funeral feasts (a bequest from paganism) accompanied quite commonly by the Eucharist. Although it is doubtful whether the catacombs were used for customary worship, it is certain that the two sacraments were celebrated there. The baptisteries still exist, and in that now known as San Pontianus there is, immediately above the baptismal pool, a fine fresco of the baptism of Christ. "It is unnecessary to enter on any detailed description of the frescoes which cover the walls and ceilings of the burial-chapels in richest abundance. It must suffice to say that the earliest examples are only to be distinguished from the mural decorations employed by their pagan contemporaries by the absence of all that was immoral or idolatrous, and that it was only very slowly and timidly that any distinctly religious representations were introduced" (*Enc. Brit.*, Vol. V., p. 496, art. Catacombs).

The Basilican and Byzantine periods were rich in mosaics, revealing still more the absorptive character of Christian pictorial representation. It must be remembered that the term "picture" is not limited to the modern and popular meaning of a painting with pigment on canvas or wood. The term in its widest sense suggests also an "image" (see Chambers' 20th Century Dictionary), and may be thought of as including all the known and used media through which ideas and inspirations are visually portrayed. Thus mosaic, far removed as it is from painting, is to be included in any discussion of pictorial art. Moreover, the medium and method used lent themselves to the subjects depicted, adding the attribute of permanency to that of beauty in colour and design. In no form of art have the two been in such balanced combination and reached so high a state of artistic excellence—deep indigos, lapis-lazuli, peacock and emerald greens, the whole range of possible yellows from the tint of lemon, through the ochres, to the golden glory of the pomegranate, reds from the deepest madders to the blush of the Alpine rose-math, a veritable riot of the spectrum within the limits of lustrous gold and silver line, these were the materials that early Christians borrowed from their pagan neighbours to depict the majestic

humility and simple grandeur of the earthly life of their Lord and the triumph of His heavenly glory.

It is difficult to escape from the conclusion that whatever else the early Christians feared, it never occurred to them to run away from the subtle influence of beauty. Inheriting a borrowing tendency from their natural forbears, they borrowed wisely and well. They were not lotus eaters, and hedonism had never been heard of in those days. They felt the narrowing influence of a limited vocabulary. They believed that the Holy Spirit of God was more than literate. They were carried along by the compelling greatness of an evangel which made the stars of the heavens and the sun in all its glory instruments of proclamation. As well tell them that God did not speak through art as tell a child that a flower was not beautiful. The picture to them was a potent means whereby they could reveal the story of redeeming grace.

When, through the influence of St. Francis of Assisi, the art of Italy became emancipated from the conventions of the Byzantine school, the more realistically human came into being. It was the human Jesus who was portrayed on panel or sculpted in stone. Even when making excursions into the realms of glory and judgment, the primitive thought of Jesus as taking to heaven a human brow. But by far the greatest attraction was in the cradle and the cross. They never could forget the Virgin, and the cross was not only central with them, it was final. A stranger to Christendom wandering round a gallery of primitives and old masters would be forced to the conclusion that Christianity started in a cradle and ended on a cross. The Resurrection had no place in the range of subjects on which they chose to exercise their genius. Cimabue, the pioneer of the Florentine school, gave many "Crucifixions" to the world. The single example of painting attributed to Cimabue which came to this country for the Exhibition of Italian Art in 1930 was a tempera of the Virgin and Child. Cimabue's pupil, Giotto, shepherd of Vespignano and friend of Dante, followed his master in the choice of his subjects. The Beatified Friar John the Angelic of Fiesole, known to posterity as Fra Angelico, ventured to cross the boundary into the land that lies between Calvary and Olivet. In the museum-convent of S. Marco, Florence, there is a fine altar-piece for the choir showing us the Marys at the Sepulchre. The Lippis, father and son, Sandro Botticelli, Antonella da Messina (whose "St. Jerome in his Study" is one of the most arresting pictures in the National Gallery), even Michael Angelo, the supreme master of arts, Leonardo da Vinci, famous to-day for one of the best-known and most-loved mural panels in the world, "The Last Supper," all linger around the

cross and dwell on the scenes of mortality of which it is the centre. In other lands, as well, we find that same emphasis on the physical experiences of Christ. El Greco, the Cretan who chose Toledo in which to die, Goya, whose many panels are like Freudian dreams, Velasquez, Memlinc, the Van Eycks, teachers of so many in their own land and throughout Europe, make but a meagre selection of those who gave us a portraiture of Christ more effective in their day, and in ours, than any written word. Sombre and morbid oftentimes as was their art, it had the enduring qualities of a living message to their own and subsequent generations.

Disciplined as were the early painters and artists by their pastors and masters, they caught the essential and authentic note of the Gospel. Partial as was their view, it was a natural step in the evolution of pictorial presentation. We have only to look at Holland, and at the Pre-Raphaelite School in this country, to see that the use of art as an instrument of evangelism passed from the experimental stage into that of assured acceptance.

The most notable paintings and etchings of the life of our Lord are given to us by Protestant Holland. At a time when religious ferment was delivering the Dutch people from the yoke of Rome, when the Bible was becoming a national handbook, Rembrandt van Rijn etched his immortal "Christ at Emmaus" and his equally penetrative plate, "The Incredulity of Thomas." Rembrandt gave to the world a new conception of the Saviour, a conception perhaps more enduring than that of Luther, Melancthon or Calvin. The softened light, the glowing face, the astonished awe of the disciples, give to us pictorially what cannot well be described in words.

The Pre-Raphaelite Movement appears retrogressive at first sight, but it was actually a great step forward in visual presentation of great themes. The subjects chosen by the members of this group were mainly from the New Testament. They were the modern pioneers in the proclamation of the Gospel through art. Holman Hunt's "Light of the World" has penetrated the hearts of ordinary folk in this and other countries from its resting-place in St. Paul's far more than much of the learned rhetoric that disturbs the dust of that historic pulpit. Millais' "Christ in the House of His Parents" still gives from the Tate Gallery its silent message to men and women, and has survived the fulminations of Charles Dickens, who described it as "a pictorial blasphemy, mean, odious, revolting and repulsive." Ford Madox Brown is preaching every day from the National Gallery in his "Christ washing St. Peter's Feet."

Of modern artists and craftsmen perhaps future generations will most appreciate Joseph Epstein, and I venture to include his

work in my survey under the cover and defence of the dictionary's secondary definition of pictorial art. His statue of Christ is exegesis of the highest order. The hands alone, so massively significant, with the deep, clear incisions in the palms, are a gospel in themselves. That magnificent neck on which the strong young head is poised, that vital mouth and chin, the Hebraic nose, bring the days of His Flesh into the Glory of the Resurrection, and perpetuate the Christ of Galilee in the Christ of the Garden.

It is not possible more than barely to illustrate the value of pictorial art to the witness of the Gospel in the world. Many examples must occur to the reader, mention of which is necessarily omitted here. Sufficient, however, has been said to state the claim of art to be accepted as a vehicle of expository and devotional value, and not to be set aside as irrelevant to the important work of making the Gospel known to the world. The crudest and simplest portrayal of the incidents in the life of our Lord is also an interpretation. The educated mind alone is able to place the right value on words, but the least sophisticated may understand a picture. The artist, as a child of his age, uses the formulae he has been taught; but if he is faithful to his inspiration he is an expositor in the truest sense of the word. There is a permanent value here, more enduring than the fugitive word of pulpit or platform. What the eye sees the mind remembers; we often hear, indeed, but understand not. Nothing is so evanescent as mass emotion produced by eloquence; nothing is so enduring as resolution born in contemplation. It is the vision, not the voice, without which the people perish.

Pictorial art is the universal language, transcending the barriers of nation and race. The artist, like the saint, crosses all boundaries and surmounts all divisions. The potencies of a lasting world peace lie not in a reformed diplomacy, nor yet in the right kind of government, but in the consecration of the creative faculty of man to the cause of the Gospel. In this is our hope. The first step in this direction is the development of cultural appreciation of the message of art.

T. A. BAMPTON.