

The Holy Spirit is an artist. How else could we describe God's Spirit at work, taking the raw materials of our lives—everything that's broken, or unrepentant, or hurting—and using these to make beautiful lives with us? How does God infuse eternal value into what we do with our lives if not by the creative work of the Holy Spirit?

Preparing today's sermon took me away from my desk, and away from the bible commentaries in search of art. Or, more accurately, it sent me on a search for a grain of rice among the high-rise buildings in Canary Wharf. But it wasn't as difficult to find as it sounds: the grain of rice is in fact a bronze sculpture some thirty-six feet in height. I went to see it because I was intrigued by the work of BASED UPON studio, headed by the brothers Ian and Richard Abell. As we heard, it is during London Craft Week, and so we have with us and for the coming weeks another work from their studio. The work is on the plinth beneath its accompanying neon script where the painted sunburst usually lives.

The Abell brothers lead a team of fifty artists, designers and craftsmen and women who have developed casting, application, and finishing methods that turn metals into visually opulent forms that defy their own materiality with—what can only be described as—a liquidity of movement. The team turns out beautiful objects and installations destined to grace spaces where there is a story to be told. This might be a family home, a gallery, or a public atrium. Or a church; anywhere where there is a story worth telling in new and beautiful ways.

'Grain of rice' is one of their most important works. It is essentially a giant, hollowed out sculpture modelled from a grain of rice. It's finely polished gilt interior envelops viewers in golden gleam. The sculpture tells a story of commerce, human ingenuity and of hard work across many generations making possible progress and trade. Not a bad thing to remember today on this International Workers' Day

I wanted to get a better idea of what drives the art

and creativity of the team behind the studio, and so I knew I had to go see the work in person. But a conversation was also important: the Abell brothers and their creative team think of their artworks as stories told in material form. So I rang up the studio and spoke to Enla Fees, she is one of the artists responsible for these creations, and she spoke to me about how story shapes their artworks.

Enla described a liquid metal technology that produces a lush finish when applied over a supple, sculpted surface. And that was interesting enough. But, again, the studio sees itself as a workshop where stories are told in material creations. So I wanted to know the story of the piece we have with us, titled, "In the cathedral of your spirit, I am happy queueing for your wine."

This phrase is cast in bronze and follows a handwritten script twisting and turning back in on itself, like a Mobius strip. The result is unending sculpture. The form is inspired by the crown of thorns. But it is as if Christ's crown of thorns has been bathed by the gleam of the Resurrection, and so this piece for me recalls the triumph of love, self-sacrifice, and humility on the cross.

For the artists, the story of the creative process—making something beautiful from the ordinary—is also part of the work. The materials are not inherently valuable (bronze is a common enough alloy). But the stories that inspire creativity in the team of designers and artists weave into their works beauty and given them a purchase on the sublime.

Enla tells me that "In the cathedral of your spirit" speaks of the artists' sense of awe when first encountering the simplicity of a creative instinct or idea; and it speaks of artists who recognise that they stand before a presence greater than themselves.

"Queueing for your wine" speaks of the decision to follow the contours of the creative impulse with openness to directions other than anything previously foreseen. This, as it turns out, is a journey into humility, for the sublime always remains just beyond the reach of the artist's skill and best efforts. And yet, there is a need to capture something of the original ray of light that artists simply call "inspiration." The neon text that

accompanies the Mobius crown sculpture attempts to tell that part of the story: it attempts to capture the original idea initially recorded on a piece of paper in Ian Abell's handwriting. It is a way of honouring that initial gesture towards creativity.

But why do I have the feeling that I'm preaching to the choir? This church is gifted with people with vocations in the creative and performing arts. Perhaps you recognise artistic creativity as a process of being moved and shaped by a feeling or an intuition to the point that the initial inspiration simply has to come to life in some form. Does artwork ask to be born, or does it simply burst into a willing spirit? In other words, does artistic inspiration itself give us 'eyes to see' and 'ears to hear'?

Enla, and the Abell brothers and the studio work of BASED UPON has left me asking such questions. But today they also lead me to reflection about the Holy Spirit we read about in today's Scripture.

Both readings are about the creative activity of the Holy Spirit. In John's gospel, Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit, saying that this will be God finding a home among believers: "...we will come to them," Jesus says, "and make our home with them" (v. 23). **But God's personal, home-making presence cannot be privilege of the chosen twelve. God's presence will immediately fill the lives of many, like a wind filling the sail of every ship it catches on its path.**

And so in the story from the book of Acts, we meet Lydia, a merchant of purple cloth; this was a luxury material in the ancient world. (Again, an appropriate reading for Labour Day.) The Holy Spirit opens Lydia's heart to the Gospel message, and she immediately goes about creating in her life and in her home space for God to take up residence. Further along in the story, Lydia's house is where Paul and ministry companions retreat to when they are met with violence at the hands of the local police. And so Lydia, inspired, by the Holy Spirit, inscribes her story into the story of the church.

It might help to bear in mind that "the Holy Spirit" is the particular way the New Testament speaks of God in action,

But, let's be clear about one thing: the Holy Spirit

is the particular way the Bible speaks of God in action, God the artist who uses ordinary, human lives as his canvas; God who encounters us, inhabits our imagination, and transforms and empowers us to tell a story of God but with the makings of our own story. And let's remember also that this is God who is life-giver, the feminine form of Spirit which the Old Testament calls "ruah." And to help us do that, 'In the Cathedral of Your Spirit' is located close to the Mary Beale memorial. And so we have the 17th century female artist to remind us that the Spirit of God gestates, gives birth to and nurtures – with a mother's life-creating joy – the fruits of the Spirit: love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and peace making.

Yes, the Holy Spirit is an artist. And this divine artist is waiting to be received, to be invited in to make a home in our hearts and our minds, our hands, our feet. That is why this week, in the life of the church, we are encouraged to pray and wait with expectation for what might happen when the artistry of the Holy Spirit sweeps into our lives. This coming Thursday, we begin a season of waiting. It lasts only the nine days that mark the period between Christ's ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

And for us, from today, this artwork in our midst is a delicate picture of God's activity, a miniature cast of what God the Holy Spirit does when she inspires and births in us a new telling of God's story.

So, in the coming days, let our waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit follow the humble gesture that the artists have given us in this artwork, and simply pray: **"In the cathedral of your spirit, I am happy queuing for your wine."**