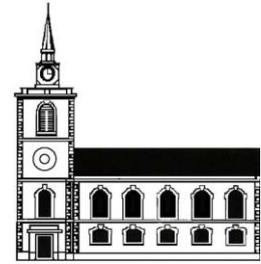


Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

The Revd Lindsay Meader

3 June 2016

Matthew 13:10-11; 13-17; 44-46; The Bright Field by R S Thomas



Sermon for RA Service for Artists

The vocation of an artist
is not simply about the works you create,
or the media you choose
or even the media that choose you –
it is about being the way you are and who
you are
sometimes without shape or form
but always with integrity and passion.
(Anon.)

Well, it's not everyday you get to stop the traffic on Piccadilly in a procession led by a steel drum band! It's a fun and fantastic way to kick off today's proceedings, but if you're not a churchgoer, you might now be wondering what you're doing here. Take a look around you. What a wonderful collection of diverse and eclectic people. And I'm greatly looking forward, after this service, to admiring the diverse and eclectic range of work that makes up the 248th Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

Congratulations. It is that single and singular achievement - having a piece of work accepted into the Summer Exhibition - that connects and unites you today. Whether it's an image, a sculpture, a design, a photo, a model, a print or a film, whether it's colour or monochrome, long or short, large or small, you have all summoned up the integrity, the passion and the courage to submit something you have created, and in doing so, submit something of your deeper self, to that experience of risk and judgement and happily in this case, affirmation. Some of you have been here before; for others it is the first time, perhaps after many submissions over the years. I say again, congratulations.

As some of you will know, this church is no stranger to art exhibitions. In December 2014, we staged a 12 day festival at Christmas, *Bethlehem Unwrapped*, to draw attention to the reality of life in Bethlehem today. Last Christmas, we hosted Arabella Dorman's *Flight*, which featured an inflatable dinghy and lifejackets salvaged from the Greek island of Lesvos, to draw attention to the growing refugee crisis, and as a reminder that shortly after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph were themselves refugees, having to flee to Egypt to protect their baby son.

We are surrounded by art today. Only this morning we've welcomed the first two of forty ankhs, which are part of *The Key*, a peacebuilding interfaith exhibition featuring 40 premier and emerging Egyptian, Middle Eastern and Western artists using the world's most ancient symbol of harmony, the Egyptian Ankh (or Key of Life), as a message of hope for a harmonious, peaceful and tolerant world.

In our prayer corner at the back you'll notice a collection of 30 pairs of glazed clay footprints, made by the homeless guests and volunteers at our Winter Shelter. They worked with our resident artist Anna on this and many other projects, and thanks to Maurice Davies, greatly enjoyed the opportunity to pay a number of visits to the Academy.

You'll also notice the two installations here at the north end of the church. Recently I was fortunate to be able to visit *Based Upon* – the creators of these two pieces. *Based Upon* exist to create pieces that, as closely

as possible, both capture and convey the emotional resonance of a particular moment or experience. As keen as you are to get over to the exhibition and see your work in situ, do please take a moment at the end of the service to take a closer look.

I was invited by Based Upon to come and view a bronze “Last Supper”. The creative process was as extraordinary as the piece itself. Rather than starting with other famous portrayals, they went right back to source. They assembled a cast of thirteen men, all of whom are men of faith, each following their own – not necessarily Christian – spiritual practice. Together they spent an intensive weekend on retreat in the country, meditating, praying and reflecting on the individual characters (Jesus and the twelve disciples), and the very human experiences and emotions during that final meal together. They then sat down to recreate the scene and at the exact moment when Judas’ intention to betray Christ became clear, at least to Christ and one or two others, Based Upon used digital technology to make a 3D scan of the whole scene, in minute detail, from which a mould was then made. Judas was seated on a pile of bronze bullion from which the finished piece was cast, thus adding further resonance, with further minute details being crafted by hand. It is without doubt the most extraordinary, powerful and life-infused portrayal of the Last Supper I’ve ever seen: telling not one story but many; the emotions were palpable and inescapable.

I imagine sitting in front of a blank canvas or screen or film or a lump of wood or clay is in many ways akin to sitting in front of a blank page when starting to write a sermon, or to an actor taking on a famous role. The creative process – in whatever form – is complex and challenging and not for the faint-hearted. The theme, the subject, the character has most likely been covered, addressed, explored many times before. The

question is, what do I have to say, to offer? What can I bring that no one else can? Ron Arad’s kinetic sculpture *Spyre* in the Annenberg Courtyard seems a wonderful metaphor for the Summer Exhibition itself – life, the world and the immediate surroundings viewed from any and every angle, with no two views being the same.

In the Bible reading we’ve heard this morning, Jesus says to his disciples, “But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.” Today I want to add to that: blessed are you, artists gathered here, and blessed are your minds and your minds’ eyes and your hands, for through them you are able to share with us what we do not or cannot see.

I am fascinated by the creative process. No doubt, every single artist here has a different approach, your own individual way of creating. Every single piece in the exhibition has its own unique story. What comes first, the idea or the form? How do you find a way of communicating, of expressing that for which there are no words? Who is your work for? What is it that drives you to create? It is the desire to express beauty, to cry out in anger, to demand justice, or make a political protest? Is it a challenge, a social commentary, a celebration of a particular emotion, an expression of solidarity or the urge to capture and convey a specific moment in time?

My visit to Based Upon is one of many experiences that wholly affirm my belief that places of creativity, studios and stages are sacred spaces, holy ground, every bit as much as places of this church, or any cathedral or temple or synagogue or mosque. Celtic Spirituality speaks of thin

places, where the veil between heaven and earth is gossamer thin. Galleries and theatres are holy ground, thin places where we come to take off our shoes and step out of our day-to-day lives, open to new ideas, experiences and imaginings; seeking fresh or new perspectives on our lives and our world; keen to attend to other voices; hungry to explore other possibilities and viewpoints. In immersing ourselves in all they have to offer, we lose track of time.

For both the creative process and the arts invite, if not compel, us to step outside of *chronos*, chronological or sequential time, and into *kairos*, a period, season or moment of indeterminate time. It is what some of us might describe as God's time, or sacred time; that experience of being caught up in the eternal now, when past, present and future fuse; *chronos* goes out of the window and we lose ourselves in the moment. When we find ourselves in *kairos*, we're not sure if it's three hours or three days since we've last eaten, and either way it's of no importance. It's when we find ourselves in *kairos* that we find our best ideas, when creative blocks dissolve and we are given a glimpse of the potential that lies within each one of us. It is in *kairos* that we access and connect with the deepest parts of ourselves and others, when our creative powers are at their peak, when we surprise ourselves.

I see that sensitivity, that openness to *kairos*, in RS Thomas' poem *The Bright Field*. The creative process is not without its cost or sacrifice. But the integrity, passion and courage it demands is rewarded by the pearl of great price. It is about taking time to engage with, mine and dare to share the best we have to offer of ourselves. It is not a process which can be rushed, but one which has great riches to offer for those with the patience, persistence and tenacity to see it through.

It was the Dalai Lama who said, "The planet does not need more successful people. The

planet desperately needs more peace makers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of all kinds." I want to add artists to that list.

In his new book, *Think Like an Artist*, Will Gompertz identifies that in our world today, "there is a developing trend towards the mega and the micro . . . On one side there are the global super-brands, huge out-of-town shopping districts, and dominant websites; while on the other there are artisans making and providing bespoke and local products and services. . . . It is" he argues, "this growing band of individuals and small collectives that is evolving into the new creative class."

In many ways, the Summer Exhibition combines both; the mega and the micro of the art world. It is famous as the world's largest open-submission show and includes works from both household names and emerging artists, bringing your work together in a display that this year's co-ordinator Richard Wilson promises us, is "unpredictable, startling and stimulating."

And so what are we doing here today? We're celebrating. We celebrate the sacred. We celebrate the holy ground that is the Royal Academy of Arts. We celebrate this famous, world-renowned exhibition and your part in it. And most of all, today we celebrate your vocation as artists. We celebrate your integrity, passion and courage. We give thanks for all the joy and excitement of this special day, and we, the Church, ask God's blessing on every single one of you and pray that you will each, in your own unique way, continue to thrive and flourish. Congratulations.

Amen.

Lindsay Meader