

Christmas 2



Aubusson Tapestry of Mary, the New Eve, over the Altar of Notre Dame de France Leicester Square

Many of us have visited our friendly Marist neighbours at Notre Dame de France in Leicester Square over the past few years, and the Parish Priest, Fr Pascal Boidin and I have become good friends. When I take people to see his church I usually tempt them there with the promise of the Jean Cocteau paintings in the side chapel, but that is not the first thing you see when you walk in. The unusual round church, originally built as ‘Burford’s Panorama’ an early form of visual entertainment in the West End, was a tourist attraction in the latter part of the 18th century, bought by the Marists in 1865 to be made over into a church for the French community in London. Badly damaged during the war it was rebuilt and redecorated in the 1950’s. Before Cocteau’s visit an Aubusson tapestry was commissioned for the east end above the High Altar, a work designed by Dom Robert OSB of the abbey at En Calcat, south east of Toulouse, who was a friend of Cocteau. That tapestry (depicted above) is what strikes any visitor first.

It has taken me some time to get used to this image, which at first sight seems rather too romanticized or even twee. In the centre is a young woman, possibly even a teenage girl, wearing white, with a veil pulled back from her face, carrying a posy of flowers and surrounded by foliage, flowers, birds and animals. We expect an image of Mary here, but the iconography is all wrong: is this a girl-bride? She looks like a fairy-tale princess. The text woven into the tapestry on either side of the girl sets us right: *Cum eo eram cuncta componens, ludens coram eo omni tempore*. This is Proverbs 8.30: ‘I was by his side ordering all things, ever at play in his presence’.

With that text the unusual image is suddenly much more interesting. This is the Old Testament female figure of Wisdom, the coeternal creative principle in the Godhead, playfully creating from the beginning *and continuing to do so* (with added allusions to Mary as the New Eve and the Church as the bride of Christ).

What has this to do with our gospel? A great deal. The figure of Wisdom in the Old Testament is taken over by John as the Λόγος, which we usually translate ‘the Word’; but it has a richer and more complex range of meaning in Greek, encompassing creativity, rationality and the ordering of all things.

Dom Henry Wansbrough comments,

Starting his gospel ‘In the beginning’, John alludes to the creation, Genesis 1.1. God created by his Word and by his Wisdom, which existed in God before the creation, one with God but somehow not identical.

This is clear in Proverbs 8, quoted on the tapestry, and also from Wisdom 7.25-26:

For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.

²⁶ For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

[Wansbrough adds:]

Similarly God's Word [capital W – not a book but the Person, Jesus Christ] accomplishes the divine purpose and returns to God: Isaiah 55.10-11

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

John's Jewish contemporary Philo writes that God's Word [again capital W] gives order, sense and purpose to creation, just as the divine Wisdom [also capital W] does: Ecclesiasticus 2.15 –

I will now call to mind the works of the Lord,
and will declare what I have seen.
By the *word* of the Lord his works are made;
and all his creatures do his will.

John uses ὁ Λόγος, The Word, masculine, rather than Wisdom, Σοφία, feminine, because he writes of God's Son, but Λόγος and Σοφία are equated in the book of Wisdom at the beginning of Solomon's prayer (9.1) in typical scriptural parallelism:

'O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy,
who have made all things by your *word*,
² and by your *wisdom* have formed humankind ...

Our first reading today made this connection for us (Ecclesiasticus 24.1,2,9):

Wisdom praises herself,
and tells of her glory in the midst of her people.
² In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,
and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:
...
Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.

So, returning to the tapestry we can in fact see Mary, the New Eve, playfully addressing us as a new bride, the Church, but also, in this joyful figure, a personification of the God she bore for the world, the creative Wisdom of the universe whom she bore as a human child.

This complicated gathering of allusions is depicted in a simple, almost naïve, image, which reminds me not to complicate things too much when I come before God, but just to gaze on the wonder of creation and the gift of our renewed life in it. I especially love that reference to God's Word, God's Wisdom, being 'ever at play', aptly illustrated by the childlike figure rejoicing in the garden of creation, in Eden renewed. I would claim play as a Catholic attribute, balancing rationality.

The imagery will get us there without too many mental gymnastics: it reminds me of the story of S John Vianney's advocacy of contemplation, a loving awareness of God's presence, especially in the Eucharist. There's his lovely story about an old man that John Vianney found in the Church just staring at the tabernacle. The priest asked him what he was doing and the man explained, "I look at him and he looks at me."

Yet the theological subtleties are all there for our contemplation too, if they help us. Understanding Christ to be the eternal Word, present at Creation and lovingly forming it (and at play with us for ever), has been in the forefront of other recent celebrations at this season: of Christmas itself, first and foremost, but also in celebrating S Silvester on New Year's Eve and Ss Basil and Gregory yesterday, all fourth century opponents of Arianism, which denied the eternity of the Son; of the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the importance of the creeds in forming our faith; in giving thanks for Mary's essential role in our salvation in her Immaculate Conception and Motherhood celebrated on 8 December and New Year's Day. Like Mary we are called to be 'God bearers' to the world. Today's Gospel reminds us of her Son's true identity; of the light and life that knowledge brings and our imperative calling to share the glory of the Word made Flesh.

But for me, the slightly confronting playfulness of that tapestry at NDF echoes the distinctive life-affirming genius of truly Catholic Christianity; it gives grace and truth the divine spark we all need to kindle and glimpse afresh each Christmas.