

SERMON - TRUTH BEAUTY & GOODNESS

Have you ever had the experience of coming across a beautiful piece of art created by human hands that's evoked in you a sudden and unexpected response of tears? You've stood in its presence and just found yourself overcome with emotion. And then afterwards you've found it difficult to find the right words to describe this experience. Why was I so affected?

I ask because I've had 3 standout encounters, I can remember, and I'm not including music because music often moves tears.

The first encounter was in 1990 while backpacking around Italy with Kim, my 2 brothers and 2 friends. We went to Florence for an overdose of Renaissance art, and I came face to face with Michael Angelo's masterpiece, the statue of David. I was totally unprepared and completely taken aback at the deep effect this statue of a biblical character had on me. And I had no faith perspective at all back then. So what was going on?

The second encounter was in India 20 years ago and it was the Taj Mahal that stopped me in my tracks. We entered the grounds and there it was in all its splendour. And I just stood there in a state of awe. And it quietly but powerfully evoked in me all sorts of emotions that manifested in tears. And I know that Princess Diana described the same experience as did Salman Rushdie. Who wrote about it very beautifully actually?

But it was the close encounter of the third kind around 22 years ago, that was to have the most profound and life-changing impact on my life.

But I'll come back to this in a moment.

Because here's the questions I want to explore today. And good questions to discuss over lunch.

Why do these encounters evoke this unexpected response in us?
Why do they touch our *inmost being* in such a profound way?
Psalm 139:13-14
"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that full well."
The divine fingerprint, the divine Chord

Why do these encounters evoke this unexpected response in us?

Why do they touch our *inmost being* in such a profound way?

Be it these noble offerings of our creative endeavours, God's revelation in nature, or in any acts of loving service by one human being to another. **What's going on?**

Well, I want to start with these words of the Psalmist from today. I think they point us in the right direction¹³ For YOU (O God) created my inmost being; you knit me

together in my mother's womb.¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. My soul knows that full well

The Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) created our inmost being. It's the echo of Genesis. **"Let us make humans in our image."** We all carry the divine fingerprint, the **divine Chord in our inmost being**. And it's fearfully and wonderfully made in the shape of all that is True, Beautiful and Good.

So when we encounter anything that carries imprint and radiance of this shape it strikes the divine chord within us all.

TRANSCENDENT
An encounter that surpasses, exceeds,
transcends the limits of our ordinary
experience and knowledge.
Palm 139:6
Such knowledge is too wonderful
for me, too lofty for me to attain.

And the reason we can often struggle to find the right words to describe these powerful experiences is because they are Transcendent in nature. **Transcendent** - means beyond the range of our normal physical human experience. An encounter with the divine that surpasses, exceeds, *transcends* the limits of our ordinary experience and knowledge.

It's the words of the Psalmist in today's reading... **6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.**

I truly believe (because I've experienced it in my own journey of faith) that any encounter with the true, the beautiful and the good, in whatever form or expression, can give us windows into the divine. Windows to glimpse the face of God.

Doorways to the divine.

Doorways that give us the opportunity to step into and seek the **very source** of all that is True, Beautiful and Good.

It's the words of St Paul from today's reading in **Romans 1:20**

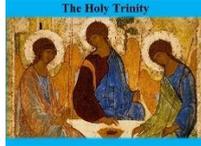
Romans 1:20
For since the creation of the world God's
invisible qualities—his eternal power and
divine nature—have been clearly seen,
being understood from what has been
made, so that people are without excuse.
Psalm 139:7
Where can I go from your Spirit Lord?
Where can I flee from your presence?

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

It what I've personally experienced. Even before I knew God, God was making Himself known to me. Before I was seeking the Triune God, I had the sense that the Triune God was seeking me.

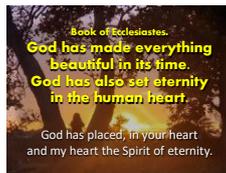
It's the words of the Psalmist... **7 Where can I go from your Spirit Lord? Where can I flee from your presence?**

But should we be surprised by any of this. If God created my inmost being and your inmost being, then we all carry the divine Chord within us, waiting to be struck. And a telling characteristic of encountering the true, the beautiful and the good, is that it will always enrich our souls. It will feed our inmost being. WHY?



Because **All truth is God's truth - All goodness is God's goodness - All beauty is God's beauty.** These are the divine qualities that harmonizes the human soul with the divine meaning and purposes of The One Triune God.

But there is another characteristic for me that's always at the very essence of these encounters with the transcendent. Which is why these scripture words that I'm now going to read, are the words of my deep wisdom for this moment. They SO capture the truth of ALL THIS. From the book of Ecclesiastes.



1 God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has also set eternity in the human heart. Pause on those words. God has placed, in your heart and mine, the Spirit of eternity. For me, this is just one of those sense-making wisdoms. It expresses so much of what so often feels inexpressible.

Isn't this why, St Augustine said, ***"Our hearts are restless O God until it finds its rest in you."*** The God shaped hole in all of us, that **seeks the True - desires the Good - and is drawn to the beautiful and captivated by the lovely.**

Isn't this is why, when we encounter the transcendent we always come away with the sense that we're part of something much greater than ourselves. In the great scheme of things, I know I'm very small and insignificant. But at the same time, I also sense and KNOW that I belong to something timeless and everlasting.

Isn't this why, when we lose our precious loved ones. we still feel a deep sense of connection. We may have lost them in the present moment, but we've never lost them in the truth of the eternal.

The beautiful words from the Hymn 'Abide with Me' express this so perfectly...

"Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me."

Nothing in life stays the same but the Spirit of the eternal God always abides in you and abides in me.

All of which brings me to the close encounter of the 3rd kind that I mentioned back at the beginning. The one that truly impacted and transformed the whole course of my life.

I have mentioned it briefly once before a while back, but I want to unpack the experience more fully in the context of today.



Back in around 1997 Kim and I were on holiday in Malta. This is at the point in my faith journey where I believe in God because I've had a powerful encounter with God 10 years previous. But Christianity doesn't figure in my life at all. I'm actually pretty antagonistic to all things Christian.

That said, I was still finding myself curiously drawn every now and then, to go into churches so clearly, **SOMEONE** wanted me to **know the truth that would fully set me free**. But only when in when they were empty. Never during a service.

So we wandered into this small church in Malta, and I came face to face with a sculpture of Christ on the Cross. And it was quite a big life-sized sculpture. And I just found myself transfixed. I was completely captivated by this figure of Christ on the Cross.

I remember looking into the face of Christ, and I felt the face of Christ looking straight back at me. Not only **at me** but looking deep **into me**. It was just Christ and me, caught in this transcendent moment.

And I just **knew, in a way that was beyond words, too wonderful and lofty for me to attain...** I just knew that I was encountering the **personification** ... of all that was true and good and beautiful, about the meaning and purpose of life.

Of course, I didn't fully grasp all that God was giving me in that moment, but I knew it was all I needed for the next step. Because **God makes everything beautiful in its time. God has set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.**

But this sculpture of Christ, made from the hands of human creative endeavours... had given me a doorway moment into the divine. A sense of the eternal truth. And I entered the doorway, and it took me on a journey that's brought me to this very moment, today.



As I look back now, the fact that it was Christ on the Cross that I encountered takes on an even deeper significance for me. Back then I had no real understanding of what the Cross was about.

But now I know that the Cross is the ultimate expression of all that is True, Beautiful, and good.

Because here Jesus Christ the one truly GOOD and Beautiful man, who called himself the Truth of Life, being put to death by all in our human condition that is not true, not beautiful, and not good.

But as the spirit of the ugly, puts to death the spirit of the beautiful, the Spirit of the good and the beautiful absorbs all of humanity's worst... and then redeems, restores and reconciles it through the beautiful power of self-giving love and grace. And this for me will always be the ETERNAL TRUTH.

CONCLUSION

So what might it look like for you to encounter the true, the beautiful and the good in your life.

We live in harsh and abrasive times, and we need this spirit to lift and encourage our hearts.

I've described the big transcendent standout moments of life, but they also come in small and beautiful packages in our everyday situations.

So as the music plays, take a few moments to think about your encounters with the true, the beautiful and good that have touched your life. And continue to do so.

LOVING GOD, we cannot flee from Your presence. Your Spirit is always pursuing us. Help us to see the doorways to the divine that you put before us.

Help us to recognise when we come face to face with Christ in our everyday lives.

We may ignore You and at times resist You O God.

But You have placed the Spirit of the eternal in all our hearts.

The Spirit of all that is true good and beautiful.

Help us to cultivate this Spirit in every part of our lives.