



Advent 2009

Dear listener,

In our culture, the Christmas season is a time in which one is more likely to encounter evidence of deliberate artistic expression than during the rest of the year. Classically trained musicians (along with enthusiastic amateurs) have gigs in performances of Handel's "Messiah" and (along with dancers and designers) productions of "Nutcracker." Visual artists (dead and alive) have their work displayed prominently on Christmas cards and in various advertisements. The culinary arts are honored in a variety of feasty occasions. Even wrapping paper sometimes features elements borrowed from Renaissance paintings or Byzantine mosaics.

Why art at Christmas? Surely it's tied to the air of ritual and formality the season still sustains (though it may not for long; last week I heard the bell-ringer tending a local Salvation Army kettle belting out "Jingle-Bell Rock"). But I wonder if there is some deeper insight lingering in this habit, some implicit recognition that the commemoration of the mysterious moment in which Heaven came to Earth requires forms of expression that involve our imaginations more fully than we normally allow.

From the beginning of the American project, the arts have been pretty low on the society's collective to-do list. Jefferson regarded the painting and statuary collected by Europeans as too costly for our humble nation. "Benjamin Franklin saw no point in importing art from Italy," notes art critic Robert Hughes, "but wished America could get hold of the recipe for Parmesan cheese." Benjamin West, the first major American-born painter, thought that art could serve a moralizing role, serving "to instruct the rising generation in honourable and virtuous deeds." When Tocqueville visited here in the mid-19th century, he suggested that the practical and egalitarian commitments of American society marginalized art: "Democratic nations cultivate the arts that serve to render life convenient in preference to those whose object is to embellish it; they will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful."

The assumption that the real business of life can be separated from beauty is one of the forms taken by the dualistic tendency that has plagued the Church since its birth. "Useful" usually refers to life in the body, life in space and time, life bounded by material concerns. "Beauty," on the other hand, is not useful because it has nothing to do with the world of matter. But what if the only way we can really live well in space and time is under the influence of beauty?

The Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant was very sensitive to the dangers of pitting the useful and practical against the beautiful, against awareness of the transcendent. He thought that American culture habitually assumed that the world was simply meaningless raw material and that this assumption prevented us from living well on the earth. "Perhaps," he suggested, "we are lacking the recognition that our response to the whole world should not most deeply be that of doing, . . . but that of wondering or marveling at what is, being amazed or astonished by it, or perhaps best, in a discarded English usage, admiring it." Grant went on to argue that only when we have perceived Creation in all of its meaningfulness, in all of its mysterious givenness and endowed capacities, could we properly and reverently consider how we might use it, or rather, be good and worthy stewards of it.

Grant believed that the posture we needed before the world was first one of contemplation, that being obediently practical required an openness and attentiveness like that sustained by the best art. In his book, *Grace and Necessity*, Rowan Williams has suggested that the artistic "represents the

communion between the inner life of the objects of the world and the human self.” [p. 23] The inner life of the objects of the world! What a wonderful description for an aspect of a meaningful Creation denied by a preoccupation with the merely practical.

Art at its best testifies to the coherence of the material and the meaningful. But that is a coherence denied even by many modern Christians. Premodern Christians tended to be more confident about the connections between the physical and the spiritual. Flannery O’Connor observed that “St. Augustine wrote that the things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things. To the person who believes this—as the western world did up until a few centuries ago—this physical sensible world is good because it proceeds from a divine source.” O’Connor argues that, informed by this view, the aim of the artist is “to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe. . . . The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.” Art presupposes a coherence and intelligibility in Creation, even when artists deny that Creation has those qualities. Art works because the world is a Creation, not simply a meaningless, cosmic accident. Even people who believe that the world is the product of chance, when they work creatively, often cannot help but to behave otherwise.

This recognition is a recognition about the Incarnation, and so perhaps it seems to be more plausible at Christmas. In the same letter to the Colossians in which St. Paul asserts the union of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ, he also writes that by Christ “all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, . . . all things were created through him and for him. . . . And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Paul links the Christian understanding of Creation—in all its coherence and meaningfulness—with the idea of the Incarnation. We are created in the image of the one who became flesh, who entered his own Creation and knew it and talked about it from the inside. This is why the Incarnation is so important to a Christian understanding of art and imagination: it doesn’t just set an example for our giving concrete form to inner convictions. It reaffirms an essential continuity between us, God, and the world that we inhabit. It is on the basis of that continuity that both reason and imagination can properly and confidently “take up with the world.” The work of Christ not only reverses our alienation from God; it reassures us that at the deepest level of our being, we are not alienated from the world.

This incarnational confidence is the basis of the work of **MARS HILL AUDIO**. In a time when it is very tempting to submit to the demands either of the obviously practical or of the merely entertaining, we believe that the cultural lives of Christians should be remarkably different—bearing witness to the fact of a good and meaningful Creation, practicing a patient attentiveness toward the particularities of life in the body, cultivating a reverence toward reality.

We can only continue our work of encouraging such a posture with your help. Many of you make donations throughout the year, and your partnership is essential to our pursuit of faithfulness, a partnership for which we are grateful. If you believe what we do is valuable, and you are able to do so, please consider offering your support with a generous year-end gift.

Gratefully,



Ken Myers
Host and Producer