

Sunday 24 May 2009: Seventh Sunday of Easter

Inhabiting the place

Readings: Acts 1.15-17; 21-end; John 17.6-19

One Person. One Hour. One & Other. This is the headline for the living art experience that will be coming to the Fourth Plinth here in Trafalgar Square this Summer. Devised by sculptor Antony Gormley, volunteers are being sought from all over the UK to take part in what will be a living, breathing monument. Every hour, 24 hours a day, for 100 days, different people will make the fourth plinth their own; inhabiting a space usually reserved for generals and kings or contemporary works of art. Instead the people themselves will be the *living image* that collectively will celebrate the rich diversity of this country. For the 2,400 who will be selected, it is a chance to show who they are to the world in this space, uniquely opened up to them. With the rules allowing those taking part to do whatever they want for the whole hour, as long as it's legal, they will be able to say this is me, in this place, in their own unique way... No doubt there will be the full gamut of those passionate for a cause, the performer, the funny, the sad, the mad and simply bemused, bored or bizarre,...

As Anthony Gormley says "*this elevation of everyday life to the position formerly occupied by monumental art allows us to reflect on the diversity, vulnerability and particularity of the individual in contemporary society.*"

His aspirations for the project are that '*people will be given a chance to really show who they are and what they care about, their hopes and fears now and for the future*'.

It looks to be an important project – one that will both celebrate people's uniqueness as well as exposing their vulnerability. They will witness to who they are in that space. And collectively we will have what Gormley describes as a '*portrait*' of Britain.

As we come to the last few days of the Easter season we find ourselves with the disciples as they prepare to stand as witnesses – in those pregnant days following the Ascension - waiting to be equipped through God's Spirit and called forward into that place that Jesus has created. In all *their* vulnerability, to speak and act and live in their own unique way – the message of the Gospel – witnessing to the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. They will be the *living portrait* of Jesus Christ.

Through the specific calling of Matthias that we hear of today, we hear again the call upon each individual to be and do and proclaim in our lives what we have known and experienced and received of the risen Christ, encouraged that we can and must only *witness to his resurrection* in our own way.

In Gerard Manley Hopkins poem *As Kingfishers catch fire*, we are reminded of the full potential of each person, uniquely called as we come to know ourselves as loved by God; each...

*Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his*

*To the Father, through the features of men's faces.*¹

One of things that I have been overwhelmed by, living here in the middle of the city for just a few weeks, is the constant stream of people – workers in the morning, cleaners and clubbers at night, visitors in the day. It is easy to forget that in the sea of faces, we should look for the love of Christ and expect to find it, witnessed through the most unlikely of people. Even... the bored, the bemused and the bizarre.

Inhabiting the Place

So what is this place that we are called to inhabit? In the book *Praying for England*, which tries to re-imagine the place of the Church of England in today's 'secularized' culture, and what a church's priestly presence in that culture might mean, a number of youngish priests share their stories of how in their own way they seek to inhabit and hold open to others the place where Jesus is.

In his epilogue to the book Rowan Williams describes this place as somewhere that

*... has been cleared where the act of God and human reality are allowed to belong together without rivalry or fear; the place where Jesus is. It is a place where... God demands nothing and imposes nothing but simply abides in unceasing love, a love that can only be imagined in the human world and human language in terms of vulnerability. .. What has opened this place or doorway is the action of Jesus.*²

The unceasing love that defines the place is expressed in the prayer that Jesus offers up to his Father in the high priestly prayer from our Gospel reading today, as he prays for his disciples. An unending spiral of love, compassion and mutual regard, into which the disciples (and we) are invited to step and be part. *Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*

Knowing our needs and vulnerability, in need of his protection, our witness is to recognise and inhabit the space where Jesus' priesthood has been exercised, not to defend it but to welcome others into it...remembering that we are there at God's initiative and invitation. Called to '*occupy the place where it is possible to fail, to need and to let down defences.*'³

Of the priests who share their stories in *Praying for England*, one seeks to minister to their local community when a young child, Adam, is murdered, another as she cares for her own family living with her daughter's addiction, each finding their own way to invite others into the space where Christ's transforming love can be known.

The first priest, Stephen Cherry, expresses his understanding of what being in that place has meant for his church community, as they struggled to witness to Christ, helping others through the trauma of Adam's death. He draws out from the wounds of this particular adolescent's death how the church is called to minister to the Adam that is also the universal Adam, to all people.

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89). *As Kingfishers Catch Fire, dragonflies draw flame* Poems. 1918.

² Samuel Wells and Sarah Coakley, '*Praying for England*', Continuum 2008, p. 175

³ Samuel Wells and Sarah Coakley, '*Praying for England*', Continuum 2008, p 176

*In the Adam-like Christ, God is in a compassionate, earthy, healing solidarity with humanity at it's most vulnerable and tragic...Our role is to seek out the company of 'Adam' wherever Adam may be and enter into that relationship with both Adam and Christ which is at once harrowing and yet also the basis of resurrection, which feels like hell but is at the gate of heaven...(it is) the action of the Church in partnership with its crucified, risen and ascended Lord.'*⁴

Occupying that place, witnessing to the truth of Jesus Christ, exposes us and makes us vulnerable. It means witnessing to Christ's truth in difficult places *and* ordinary life and so finding them holy.

As the disciples wait in what must have been a time of uncertainty and fear, as they prepare to step into the place that Jesus has called them to, they pray. What better prayer to reflect on than the prayer of Jesus, now ascended, who prayed for them, *And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.*' What better one for us as we wait for Pentecost.

Ten years ago Mark Wallinger's *Ecce Homo: Behold the Man*, was the first sculpture to occupy the Fourth Plinth. It portrayed Christ at the moment he was handed over to the crowds by Pontius Pilate. Vulnerable, truthful...

Because he came and stood in that place, we too are called there. Vulnerable and exposed *but at the same time* (like the disciples) surrounded by the love and protection of God.

He calls us onto the plinth, his Church exposed in the world, for all to see...

- *This church*, enjoying the afterglow of its renewal project, called into a new place... exploring and learning how to live and breath and inhabit this space in a Christ-like way.
- *The Anglican Communion* – that we pray for today - vulnerable, exposed, waiting and wounded...for all the world to see...called into a new place.
- *Each one here*, waiting on the gift of God's spirit, in our own unique way, called into a new place.

To live and work and pray and love...in the place where Jesus is.

⁴ Samuel Wells and Sarah Coakley, *'Praying for England'*, Continuum 2008, p.40