

Beauty in Creation – some reflections in the water

Peter Rainford

God and Beauty

God is revealed as a Trinity of persons but a different kind of threesome is sometimes invoked, of the transcendent qualities of truth, goodness and beauty – loosely associated with logic, ethics and aesthetics. The threesome has classical roots but they have been incorporated into Christian theologies and are written into in the formal Roman Catholic Catechism.

As qualities of the one, eternal God, they may be understood as objective, absolute and inseparable. However, our perception and experience of these characteristics is incomplete, and so they have become, for us, subjective, relative, and distinct (if potentially overlapping).

That gap is particularly evident with beauty. As creatures of the Enlightenment, we readily default to conceiving of truth as objective and absolute. And there is often an implicit assumption that there is some kind of universally recognisable goodness and 'natural' justice. But beauty is seen as very much more in the realm of the subjective, in the eye of the beholder rather than eternal, with conventions formed by cultures and preferences influenced by personalities.

However, it was Augustine of Hippo who addressed God as 'Beauty, so ancient, so new'. The Psalmist longed to 'gaze upon the beauty of the Lord' (Psalm 27.4). Congregations were called on to 'worship the Lord in the splendour [or beauty] of [his] holiness (Psalm 96.9). Some more modern hymns and worship songs address God as beautiful. This would point us to the possibility of beauty as an eternal quality and not merely in the eye of the beholder. It also means that our notion of beauty needs to extend far beyond expectations based on our limited subjective experience or taste. Beauty will continue to include loveliness and attractiveness but has also to embrace splendour, magnificence and sheer awesomeness.

But, if beauty is a characteristic of the Creator we would expect to see it reflected in some way in the Creation. And, it has been observed that, whilst truth may convince, beauty attracts¹.

Beauty in Creation

Beauty in the natural world is widely recognised – so our National Parks have been set up to conserve and enhance the *natural beauty*, wildlife and cultural heritage and we

¹ See Alistair McGrath reflecting on CS Lewis; also, on the role of beauty in attracting, noting Barth quoted in <https://keithstarkenburg.com/beauty-glory-and-trinity-in-karl-barth-and-david-bentley-hart/> and Balthasar quoted in http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2413-94672019000200012

have a raft of other Areas of Outstanding *Natural Beauty*. A case could be made that our current appreciation of the aesthetics of the natural world is essentially cultural, owing more to our heritage of the Romantic Movement's recognition of beauty and possible meaning in nature. But it is also possible that nature's intrinsic qualities were still recognised in previous cultures although people were then more preoccupied with survival and the natural world as a resource to be used or managed rather than aesthetically contemplated. Perhaps Wordsworth's 'something far more deeply interfused' (whatever that was) was just waiting to be made explicit. However, 18 centuries before, Jesus' comparison of wild flowers with the splendour of Solomon (Matthew 6.29) suggests that the beauty of the natural world was not lost on him or his hearers. (There is also a passing reference to the beauty of blossom in the Letter of James (1.11)). And in the second Creation narrative the trees were 'pleasing to the eye' as well as 'good for food' (Genesis 2.9). The opening and closing passages of the Bible have natural settings through which, very significantly, rivers flow (Genesis 2.10, Revelation 22.1).

These reflections take water as just one example. Like everything else, we can see water in terms of truth – as a liquid comprising two atoms of hydrogen for every one of oxygen, covering just over 70% of the surface of our planet, essential for life as we know it and comprising around 60% of human body weight. And we can see it in terms of goodness, with the moral imperative of ensuring that supplies of water are available for all and that technology, economics and politics work together to that end. But there is so much more to water. Our lives are diminished if we cannot also see water as an aspect of beauty.

Of course, water is only one part of the natural world. Much of our aesthetic appreciation of nature is of composite scenes rather than their individual parts – rather as we appreciate the orchestration of the symphony without always singling out the instruments that contribute to it. But it can also be a particular delight to discover the instrumentation. So the beauty of water is experienced in the still lake, the ripples on the pool, the meandering river, the racing stream or the rolling sea – all distinctive and essential features of the beauty of the bigger and more diverse landscape. What water conveys is partly visual (as in landscape painting) but it may also be the sound, such as the pounding of waves, the roar of a waterfall or the burbling of a brook, that completes the experience.

Water might also be experienced in its frozen form. There aren't the biblical examples. But we may have experienced the exquisite filigree of freshly fallen snow on the finer branches of a treescape and, with magnification, the structures of the snowflakes appear aesthetically flawless. Or, we may experience it in the clouds in the western sky, where the amber or red reflections of sunset may arouse delight and wonder.

But there is a wilder beauty. The lazily flowing river takes on a dramatically transformed character when it is in flood, its surface churned up and disturbing. And, whilst cloud patterns may delight, the beauty of an approaching great cumulonimbus cloud comes with awesome qualities.

Of course, not all-natural phenomena exhibit beauty or splendour, of whatever character. Stagnant ponds, residual floodwater or old snow arouse little or no sense of delight or wonder and unbroken layers of low-level stratus may have a depressing effect. But beauty is highlighted by not being commonplace. And it is evident enough to be entirely consistent with a Creator one of whose attributes is Beauty.

Communication through Creation

How far might we expect the values of truth, goodness and, in particular, beauty to be expressed in Creation? Clearly, we will not find propositional statements smuggled into fossilised engravings or digitised in force fields. But, rather, as art communicates, could Creation, with its beauty, be expressing something too?

In Scripture, we find biblical hints that something is, indeed, being communicated by Creation. Paul uncompromisingly asserted that God's eternal power and deity have been made known in the things he made (Romans 1.19-20). The Psalmist alluded to it in more mysterious terms – the heavens are telling the glory of God ...they have neither speech nor language ... yet their words have gone to the ends of the earth (Psalm 19.1-4). Whilst the psalm goes on to recognise that we need the light of the revealed Law as well as that of the created sun, the preceding text still suggests that the light of the sun complements what can be set out in writing.

Perhaps there is a parallel with understanding or getting to know an artist. Understanding the statements presented in an artist's biography or autobiography would be incomplete without some appreciation of the art they had created. However, much art is presented with 'neither speech nor language'. Of course, what is perceived as significant will vary between interpreters and others may not pick up any meaning, let alone understanding of the artist or their intentions. The art could be appreciated just in its own right – some prefer not to know about the artist. But that does not mean that something of the artist is not being expressed or disclosed for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

If we believe there is a Creator it is not difficult, and actually quite natural, to believe that the Creator might be disclosing something of their nature in the Creation, with all the provisos arising for any art. Indeed the Creation, like much art, communicates something that could not be expressed propositionally, transcending words, though the corollary is that it will be much more cryptic or ambiguous. Quite apart from

beauty, it is notable how images from nature can be used to present the more explicit teaching in the Gospels and elsewhere (e.g. Mark 4.1-8, 26-34). And, either way, the impact that Creation's beauty has on us evokes a response – a form of communication in itself.

Having said that, the writings of the Bible make very little specific reference to beauty in the natural world (though beauty is quite often attributed to people). It seems that Creation is just left to 'speak' for itself. And, when it does, and it touches us at some level, we may sense we have somehow encountered the living God, evidenced in a spontaneous response of wonder and worship.

So, in our example, water in its various forms may touch us at that deeper level. 'There is a river whose streams *make glad* the city of God' (Psalm 46.4). 'He leads me beside quiet waters, he *refreshes* my soul' (Psalm 23.2b,3a). We can provide our own experiences of the effect, for example, of the reassuring sound of a river flowing unceasingly over a weir, or the calming effect of the ripples in a light breeze or of the total stillness of a quiet lakeside. The recorded sound of water is sometimes used to facilitate inner stilling and meditation.

And transcendent beauty can take us well beyond the experiences that refresh or reassure. Significantly, Psalm 19 identifies that wordless communication in the context of the vastness of the heavens rather than the more human scale of nature or landscape. The grandeur and sheer power of a waterfall like Iguazú is near overwhelming. So, too, with the seas and oceans. In the Bible, they are places of chaos (cf. Genesis 1.2) and destruction. The thunder of the great waters profoundly impacted the Psalmist, providing imagery that led on to a more powerful appreciation of the might of 'the Lord on high' (Psalm 93.3-4 – note the five parallel descriptions to give effect). Debussy's *La Mer* evokes something of this in the *Dialogue between wind and waves* ('animated and tumultuous'). Issues of meaning will not be uppermost for mariners in a storm any more than they were for Jesus' crew on a stormy Sea of Galilee (Mark 4.37-38). Yet the tumult may still communicate something of the transcendent God and on reflection, perhaps they, too, sensed some meaning in it (cf. Psalm 107.23-32).

In the Bible, clouds were signs of God's unseen and, sometimes, unsettling presence (e.g. Exodus 19.16, 34.5; Acts 1.9). On our mountains, the descent of a blanket of cloud can contribute to a sense of the numinous and our smallness.

In the revelation of God's transcendence at the end of the Book of Job, it is to Creation that the author turns to make the point. So, relating to water, 'Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb? ... Have you entered the storehouses of the snow? ... Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice?' (Job

38.8, 22, 28-9). The poetic language invites us to contemplate the implicit message of the transcendent beauty and awesomeness of the waters (and the rest of Creation).

For most of the time we may be quite unaware of this. What art communicates is also often subliminal. But when we find ourselves responding, in delight, wonder or awe, we may suspect that we have, first, received some kind of communication. And it is God as beauty, more than goodness or truth, that impacts us in this way.

Conclusion

Whether in the idyllic beauty that delights us or in the terrible beauty that awes us, Creation implicitly invites us to tune into something that words cannot express about God the Beautiful – and Awesome.

We may not detect it or we may perceive it in different ways. But that is in the nature of the medium. What stands out for many is an experience that prompts a spontaneous response of gratitude, wonder or awe, and, instinctively, turning again to the Creator.