

Father Philip's Address to St Paul's Assembly

Thursday 12th December
Theme for the week: Advent - Mary

Luke 1:39-44

Yesterday morning we heard from Mr Chan, the Head of English, about the importance of the use of English Language in the school in as many different situations as possible. In this way it will lead to both an improvement in your understanding of and also confidence in the language.

It has often been said that there are two books which are invaluable when it comes to learning English:

- The Bible and
- The Complete works of William Shakespeare.

There is a famous poster made a number of years ago which used quotes from Shakespeare to show people how much of his writing is now used by us in our conversations –

If your lost property has “vanished into thin air”
If you have ever refused “to budge an inch”
If you have been tongue-tied – a tower of strength”
If you have ever “seen better days”

then you are quoting Shakespeare!



The same is true of the Bible:

If you have “a broken heart”

If you believe that “a leopard cannot change its spots”

or that something is a “sign of the times”

If you say that something or someone has “bitten the dust”

or that we should “eat, drink and be merry”

or that you need to make a “peace offering”

or “put your house in order”

and follow the “letter of the law”

then you are quoting the Bible!

Just as the Bible and Shakespeare are important texts in understanding and using English on a deeper level, art is a vital tool when it comes to understanding religion, and Christianity. The Church throughout history has been an enormous benefactor of the arts, paying artists to create beautiful paintings, murals, statues and sculptures.

One such artist is a man called Sandro Botticelli who was born in 1445, 568 years ago.

I mention him because at the moment, across the road in the Hong Kong University at the University Museum and Art Gallery is a painting of his. If you want to see it you will have to be quick as it is only there until Sunday. It is one of his paintings of the Roman mythological goddess – Venus.



But Botticelli painted numerous pictures for the Church, including being asked by Pope Sixtus IV to paint some frescos on the walls of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome.

One very famous painting of his is this picture of the Annunciation.



We heard this event read to us at Assembly yesterday, the angel Gabriel coming to Mary and giving her the news that she would be the Mother of the Lord.

But this painting, like so many others, is not just a picture of an event. It certainly isn't trying to say that the actual Annunciation looked like this – Botticelli knew that Mary would not be living in an Italian style house such as the one he painted here.

So we need to look at the image in a different way – through the eyes of symbolism. Through the eyes of faith.

For example – Mary is wearing red clothes and covered in blue. She is often shown wearing blue in paintings or in windows or in statues.

The red dress symbolises humanity, it is the colour of blood. The blue, the colour of the sky, symbolises the heavenly, divinity.

So, in a simple thing like the colour of Mary's clothes, we are being told that God chose a human, Mary, to cover her with holiness and make her the mother of the Lord, Jesus Christ, who is God.

The angel carries in his left hand a white lily, a flower. The lily is the sign of purity – a reminder that God had prepared Mary to be mother of Jesus and kept her pure for this very moment.

But then in the background we can see another scene through the window – an image of a city and a tree. This isn't Nazareth where Mary lived, which is a poor village in the north of Israel, close to the desert. Instead it tells us of the heavenly Jerusalem, the Kingdom of Heaven, to which Jesus calls us. The river reminds us of the waters of Baptism and new life.

And in a lot of art of this time there is always one tree standing by itself. It is a symbol of the cross of Jesus, on which he died. But instead of being dead wood nailed together as a cross, it is a living tree with green leaves, a reminder that the wood of the cross opens for us new life, eternal life.

There is also so much in contemporary Christian art that speaks to us about who Jesus is and the role of religion today in society. Two weeks ago I showed you photographs of the small statue of Christ which stood in Trafalgar Square in the year 2000, dwarfed by the larger statues. It spoke to us of the different sort of image of Kingship which Jesus shows us as a servant King. That same week Dr Kennard showed us the impressive statue of Christ the Redeemer in Brazil and what that image means to the people of Rio.

Even 'non-religious' art is often informed and influenced by religion because of the important role religion has had in the encouragement of art in our world. It is very much a case that to understand art we really do need to understand religion, and religion is often renewed and refreshed by our understanding of art.

We don't have to go very far to see pieces of art which can help us grow in our understanding of faith.

I am sure that you all know of the ruins of St Paul's Church in Macau. It is a famous icon of the city. But what you may or may not have seen there is the statue at the bottom of those steps.

There is a statue of the Annunciation.



Again, it is the story we heard yesterday in our Bible reading. The angel Gabriel telling Mary that she would be the Mother of the Lord.

But Mary here is not a Middle Eastern woman – which in reality she was. Nor is she an Italian lady, like in Botticelli's paintings. Here she is very clearly Chinese, wearing a Chinese dress, and the Archangel Gabriel gives her a lily, but this time a Chinese lily, still with the message of purity.

Like Botticelli, this artist is not trying to show the event as it happened. Instead he is trying to tell us something about the event we hear of in the Bible. At the steps of the ruined Church in Macau he is telling us that the news of the birth of Jesus Christ is not just for those of one country. It is not just for people in the north of Israel. It is not just for the Italians, or the British. It is for all people, of every nation, and it can make sense to us wherever we are.

Regardless of nationality, or colour, or background, the news that God would come to earth and be born of a Virgin named Mary is for each and every one of us.

In Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, the Church asks us to think about the role of Mary and how she responded to God's call and said 'yes' - that she would accept and be the Mother of Jesus.

When we read about that event and look at pictures of Mary in art, and there are many from every country and every age, we are reminded that her story is not a distant one just to read about as if it were an event in history.

Through art the story can be renewed in our minds and made present to us.

Art can make us more aware that Christianity is not just about 'words' – it is also about our relationship with God and each other, it is about meeting God in all of our senses, and meeting Him in the unexpected.

Mary's response to God is one which means something to us today, wherever we are. Because God asks all of us to do something for him, big or small. The question is: are we going to be like Mary and respond to God and say 'yes' to Him?

In your time at this College, take every opportunity you can to improve your English by using the resources that are made available here.

But also, take every opportunity to feed your mind with a knowledge of art through religion, and a knowledge of religion through art. Not only will some of the most important pieces of art in the world take on new meanings for you, but you may also find that the message of God is closer to you than you may think.

Thank you.

Let us pray:

O God of creation, bless all artists,
who by their gifts make the world
a more joyful and beautiful place.

Through their work
they teach us to see more clearly
the truth around us.

In their hope and vision
they remind us
that life is holy.

Pour your Spirit upon them
that their hearts may sing
and their works be fulfilling.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.