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Straining with the prophets

by Martin Robinson

It was reported that an Anglican bishop visited the recent *Seeing Salvation* exhibition at the National Gallery twice; once with his dog collar and once without. On his first visit his normal purple shirt, dog collar and pectoral cross immediately identified him as a bishop with the result that he was besieged with so many questions from other visitors that he was not able to see the exhibits himself. The second time he learnt from experience and went incognito, without clerical garb.

This brief anecdote allows some fascinating reflection. The “show” was crowded with visitors, apparently deeply interested in the religious story but who, in many cases, were unable to detect the themes the paintings reflected. Interest, even deep curiosity, seemed to be accompanied by lack of knowledge and even puzzlement. We might not want to read too much into the numbers that attended: apparently a recent exhibition at an art museum in New York that celebrated the art of the motorcycle was also hugely patronised. But such a depth of interest in an overtly religious art exhibition might not have been predicted before the event.

The wealth of art available to put on display – of which *Seeing Salvation* showed only a fraction – speaks of the depth of the relationship between the arts

and Christianity over the centuries. The interest that the exhibition provoked suggests that the search for transcendence is profoundly present in our post-secular culture, even if that search does not connect with the many empty places of worship across our land.

What lessons might we draw from these reactions to a hugely popular artistic event? Surely the wrong reaction would be a crude attempt to see art as merely another tool to be pressed into service in evangelistic enterprise. Those who expressed their faith, whether in music, painting, sculpture, poetry or even ecclesiastical architecture, were not engaged in evangelistic endeavour so much as attempting to express deeply held convictions, feelings that preaching and liturgy could complement but not fully express. The impact of their artistic flowering might indeed have touched latent religious longings in others; but to reduce art to the level of the tract misses the point.

That leaves those of us with a passion to communicate the gospel with something of a dilemma. What do we make of the reflections of the contributors to this edition of *TransMission*? It is not possible to make a simple connection between the experiments described in the pages that follow and the programme of

the local church. That can sometimes be a problem for those who daily grapple with the day-to-day challenges of developing the life of local Christian communities. We need to be resourced, encouraged and inspired to express the faith in as many imaginative experiments as possible.

But that does not mean that the works of leading artists are unimportant for the life of the Church. We live in one of those strange “in-between” phases in cultural change. The certainties of a confident, materialist age are passing and what is to come is by no means yet clear. It is precisely in such times that the artist is called upon to express that which cannot yet be described, to picture that which can hardly yet be imagined, to strain with the prophets to bring to birth a future that allows genuine hope to flourish. This is not an easy enterprise and so the pages of this edition of *TransMission* bring as many questions as enlightenment.

These are challenging articles and to invite enjoyment is not really appropriate. But then the Christian story was never intended to bring comfort or easy answers. Rather it forces us, along with artists of all kinds, to ask what it really means to live as human beings in a world painfully fractured by evil but redolent with the hope of goodness.