Extra resources

Sacramental Life

Christopher S Webb

I'm sitting in a rather funky neighborhood coffee shop in downtown Denver, eating ice cream while I write. There's no air-conditioning, so the door is open to let in some of the brisk late Fall air. The sounds of the street outside drift in — passing traffic, a conversation on the other side of the road, a dog yapping in the distance.

A CD is playing behind the meandering conversations; the current track is Norman Greenbaum's classic psychedelic number, *Spirit in the Sky*:

When I die and they lay me to rest,
Gonna go to the place that's best;
When I lay me down to die
Goin' up to the Spirit in the Sky.

The theology of the song is not all that great (many of us, at least, would raise an eyebrow at lines like "I'm not a sinner, I've never sinned ...") but these opening lines pretty much sum up a belief held by many otherwise perfectly orthodox Christians today: our ultimate destination in life is heaven, where the Spirit of God dwells, and life in this world is only a brief transitional experience on the way to eternal bliss. To echo the words of the folk singer Arlo Guthrie,

We are only passengers on the last train to glory
That will soon be long, long gone.

Many of us have been taught to see ourselves as citizens of two very diff erent worlds: this material universe, the transient and sinful world which we are only passing through, and the greater reality of heaven, an unearthly and spiritual realm in which we truly belong.

It is a compelling perspective: life in two acts. This first act may be a tragedy, in which we are vulnerable to every woe of this world before all is dissolved in death, but at least in the second all is made well and the tears of this valley of shadows can be forgotten. The only problem is that this perspective is not terribly Christian. It is not that we do not believe in heaven, of course; we, too, can look up into the heavens with the singers and sigh longingly for a better place—or perhaps more accurately, we look into the future, towards the promised coming of the kingdom of God in all its fullness. But Christian faith is also rooted firmly in the soil of this world, this universe, this life. We may think it is comforting to seeourselves only as strangers and pilgrims on a journey through the wilderness of this world, but when we allow ourselves to think this way we are failing to grasp something very startling which lies at the very heart of the Gospel: the physicality of Jesus.

The blessed Earth

In the opening narrative of Genesis, God creates the entire material universe and repeatedly declares it to be "good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). As the culmination of all his creative acts God finally forms a human being—not a purely spiritual angel or ghost, but a flesh and blood person replete with skin, bones, muscles, sinews, and flowing blood. And into this physical being God breathes his Spirit, that which gives the new human being God's very image and likeness within—and, at last, God proclaims this entire work of creation "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Th is proclamation is never once reversed throughout the whole length and breadth of Scripture. Nothing which happens after the creation of the cosmos—not sin and the Fall, not the flood, not the depravity of successive generations of peoples, not even the hammering of the nails into the hands of Christ—once causes God to revoke his blessing on the material universe: it is "very good."

In fact, God frequently reiterates his blessing on all that he has made.

He echoes to Noah the encouragement given to the first man and woman: "be fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly on the earth" (Genesis 9:7, cf Genesis 1:28). he promises to rain blessing on the land of the Israelites if they remain faithful to the covenant with their Creator: "Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock" (Deuteronomy 28:4). his delight both in the act of creation and the ongoing

work of sustaining this universe are celebrated over and over: Job is reminded of this forcefully (Job 38-39), Solomon rejoices over it (Proverbs 8:22-31), and the Psalmist returns to the theme often. David, for example, celebrates God's faithful yearly blessing of the crops and fields:

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water the furrows abundantly,
setting its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty!
(Psalm 65:9-11)

Throughout world history, in a number of different cultures, people have developed dualist philosophical perspectives: the idea that there are two equal and opposed realms of human experience, the spiritual realm of goodness and light, and the mundane or even evil realm of the material and physical. This kind of thinking is foreign to the biblical writers. They understood clearly that this world is a place which reveals the majesty and wonder of its Creator, that "the heavensare telling of the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Paul, writing to the romans, urges them to remember that "ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20). And in recounting his vision of the coming of Christ, John affirms the visions of Isaiah when he declares that this world ends only to give place to another: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1; cf Isaiah 65:17-25).

The Word became flesh

Far and away the most startling affirmation of God's pleasure in this physical world, however, is found in the event which the biblical writers came to see as the hinge of history: the incarnation of Jesus. "In the beginning was the Word," writes John at the opening of his Gospel, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In the Greek culture which John addressed, this Word (in Greek, the logos, a term with a long and rich philosophical history) would immediately be understood as something fundamentally *intellectual* and *spiritual*, dwelling far above the grimy realities of this earth. Jewish readers, meanwhile, would have heard allusions to the Wisdom of God (notably described in Proverbs) and perhaps to the *Torah*, the great "word" of God which, for some, was believed to be the word spoken at the beginning of all time to which Genesis 1 refers.

But John proceeds to make a series of claims for this "Word" which would have shaken the minds of both Jew and Greek alike. First, says John, this "Word" is intimately bound up in the material, physical world which surrounds us: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:3-4). He writes about the logos not as some mysterious, impersonal force which patterns creation, but rather as a person, one who lives and brings life, one with whom we might enter into relationship. While this would have made perfect sense to John's Jewish readers, who would immediately have understood John to be writing about the Creator, philosophical Greek writers would have been rather more startled. The idea that one could enjoy a relationship with the logos was entirely new to Greek thinking.

And then John pushes his readers further still. "The Word became flesh," he writes, "and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). At this point John's Jewish readers would also have been shocked. While they might have been comfortable with the idea of identifying the logos with the action of God in creation (or at least with the *Torah*, the word of God spoken from creation), the idea that God might become flesh—that the ordering principle of the cosmos might not only be a divine "person" with whom we might be able to experience relationship but might choose to enter into his own created world in human flesh—was an astounding surprise. And even Greek readers would have been somewhat disconcerted; despite their long tradition of mythological stories in which the gods entered this world disguised as people or animals (or even forces of nature) there was no precedent for the assertion that either a divine creator or some more impersonal logos might voluntarily surrender his exalted place in the heavens in order to live out a limited, vulnerable human life here on earth.

And within the Christian theological tradition this "taking flesh" of the *logos*, the coming of God into human history and the

physical world in the manger at Bethlehem, was quickly understood to be the definitive starting point for thinking about the creation. A consistently dualist Christian philosophy—an attempt to assert that the material world is somehow intrinsically evil or alienated from God, and is something we must endure as a trial or punishment prior to entering into the purely spiritual joys of heaven—simply cannot be maintained in the face of the incarnation. Jesus redefines the way we see the cosmos.

A "Jesus perspective" on life

It was not only the fact of Jesus incarnation which helped re-frame the Christian understanding of life in this world, however. The way in which he lived his own life also illuminated the value God places on the realm of the ordinary: the day to day business of work, family life, meals, travel, and conversation which make up the warp and woof of almost the whole of our existence. First, the Gospels are careful to emphasize the family life into which Jesus entered in Nazareth. The earliest generations of Christians were surprised to fi nd that the Gospels were not filled with stories of young Jesus performing the same kind of miracles and healings which seemed to pepper his adult life. So surprised, in fact, that they rapidly began creating them from whole cloth. Some of these tales have survived down to our day; narratives of Jesus striking dead his playmates with a judgmental word then raising them to life again, or fashioning clay sparrows in the back yard and bringing them to life. Yet the biblical Gospels know nothing of such flights of imagination. In fact, other than the incident of Jesus being left behind in the temple at Jerusalem and amazing the teachers of the law with his profound understanding of Torah, there appears to be very little that is unusual or noteworthy about Christ's childhood and early adult years.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the significance of this. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." God emptied himself and took human form (Philippians 2:7), entering into this magnificent and broken world in which we live. And for almost thirty years he... did nothing striking at all. he lived at home with his parents, ate meals, made friends. As he grew he was, presumably, apprenticed to Joseph's trade: he became a carpenter. Working with wood, he learned to fashion furniture and household goods, and probably also worked on construction sites building homes in the area around Nazareth. Picture this: God sat astride a roof-beam with his workmates, hammer pushed into his belt, eating bread and olives for lunch while contemplating the coming afternoon's tasks. God bringing dignity to the ordinary, to labor and companionship, to the simple business of earning a living. Imagine Jesus as a child playing in the yard. Or as a student learning to read and write. Or comforting a friend after a bereavement (and not immediately raising the dead person to life). Or taking a half-day's journey to town to buy building materials. The Gospel's do not dwell on this aspect of Christ's story—and yet this is the shape of the first thirty years of his life. Almost all of it. The last three years or so, with which we are so familiar, represent a sudden and breathtaking burst of energy at the end of three decades of obscurity.

And yet even in the Gospel accounts we see the sheer *normality* of Jesus' life continuing. Despite his divine powers he does not fly from town to town like Superman; he still walks, enjoying conversation with his disciples and friends, and arriving tired, hungry, and dusty from the road. he still sits at table to share simple meals with people. His teaching is laced with tales of the everyday: a housewife kneading bread, a farmer sowing seed, a shepherd rounding up his sheep, a merchant trading. In his parables we meet not angels, saints, and holy men and women, but an unjust judge, a shrewd but dishonest steward, debtors, soldiers—the regular folks who populated the city streets. And even when Jesus performed miracles, he often did so through the most ordinary means.

When he feeds five thousand people on a Galilean hillside, he does not summon supernatural bread from heaven, the manna of the Book of Exodus. he takes fi ve commonplace loaves of bread and a couple of fish—the standard fare that might have graced any Palestinian peasant's table—and multiplies them beyond measure. he rubs mud into a blind man's eyes to bring healing, and turns well-water into sparkling wine. everywhere he goes, Jesus revels in the creation, celebrates the material and physical world. Th ere is absolutely no hint in the Gospel that Jesus is simply "passing through" this world. He is solidly rooted in it.

Perhaps the greatest example of Jesus celebrating the sacredness of the ordinary, though, can be found in the two acts known to later ages of the church as the sacraments or ordinances of Christ: baptism and the sharing of bread and wine in a common meal. Through twenty centuries Christians have hotly debated the theology and significance of these two acts (especially the latter, which we know by a dizzying variety of names that reflect our diff erent understandings—the eucharist, communion, mass, breaking of bread, Lord's Supper, and more). But every church in every generation has recognized that they need to be celebrated using some of the simplest, most common substances we experience—water, bread, and wine (or, at least, grape juice—even here we find room to disagree with one another!) When Jesus wants to lead us into some of the deepest experiences of the kingdom of God he uses the most familiar, everyday materials. And, of course, some of the most *physical*. In every way, Jesus affirmed and took joy in the material creation and our everyday lives within it. Perhaps we should be more attentive to this

simple, striking fact. To borrow the title of Arundhati Roy's novel, Jesus repeatedly demonstrated himself to be *The God of Small Things.*

Practicing the sacramental life

How can we learn to practice a more "sacramental" life—a life that takes seriously the ordinary, the everyday, and the physical world? We might perhaps start by exploring that word, "sacramental." It is an uncomfortable word for some. During and after the reformation many Christians began to question the teaching about the "sacraments" that had developed in the roman Catholic church—the idea, for example, that the bread and wine on the altar were literally transformed into the body and blood of Jesus through some miraculous act of God. They expressed that discomfort and disagreement either by adopting rather different language to describe these acts of worship (so, for example, the Baptist tradition began to speak of them as Christ's "ordinances," placing more weight on the command of Jesus than the effect of the action itself), while others simply laid them aside as divisive and unnecessary (for example, the Salvation Army or the Quakers).

We are not about to unravel twenty centuries of disagreement in these few pages. But it might be helpful to look more closely at how the "sacramental" churches actually define the word before we reject it altogether. In the liturgical tradition, a "sacrament" is usually defined as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Now admittedly it is a little hard for me to judge here, since I confess that I belong to a strongly "sacramental" tradition and so I am very predisposed to like the word! But it does seem to me that there is very little in this definition that should off end any Christian believer. It need not imply acceptance of any particular theory of what happens to water, bread, or wine during an act of worship. In fact, it need not imply the necessity of engaging in those acts at all. It seems to me to be a definition which is open to Catholics, Baptists, and Quakers alike—and all those who lie between those disparate views. It simply offers the idea that it is possible for the physical world to speak to us of spiritual reality. That need not be a divisive or sectarian concept!

So let us sidestep for a moment the questions surrounding water, bread, and wine. Th ere are plenty of wonderful books that have been written from every imaginable theological perspective that can lead us deeper into the variety of interpretations of baptism and the communion meal. Instead, let us take that definition and sweep it across the broad canvas of our entire lives. What might my life and world look like if I understood them to be essentially "sacramental"? In other words, what would it mean for my existence, everything I do and everything I experience in this material world, to be seen as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace"?

In fact, I think this is a far more fruitful question than bickering over the significance of our acts of worship (however important they may be). How would it affect my parenting if I understood raising children as a sacramental act—a way of manifesting spiritual grace in the everyday world? how would it shape my understanding of my (perhaps sometimes rather tedious) daily work? How would I find myself looking at my neighborhood, those who live around me, if I saw them through sacramental eyes? What would happen if I went shopping for sacraments rather than groceries and possessions?

The first step towards sacramental living is simply learning to see life through new eyes—to understand the invisible, spiritual grace that pulses under the surface of our mundane existence. Let me offer one suggestion as to how you might begin to acquire that new perspective.

I would like to suggest that you attend a really high-church, ritualistic, pomp and circumstances liturgical church service. Go for something truly spectacular—you are looking for a dozen ministers in flowing vestments, a profusion of candles, and billowing incense. Find a place where they really pull out all the stops. That may be your idea of heaven (truthfully, it's not far from mine!) or it may give you cold shivers. No matter. You are not attending in order to critique their theology or worship. You do not—even for a moment—have to like it. But I want you to watch what happens very carefully. Take in the colors and perfumes in the air. Watch the gestures and movements. Listen to the song and spoken word. And take note of how everything—everything—that happens fixes your attention inexorably on two of the most ordinary things in this world: a plate of bread and a cup of wine. At the heart of all this astounding ceremony is the kind of simple meal a workman could rustle up in thirty seconds in his kitchen and eat in the cab of his crane while he is working.

Now, having taken in this spectacle, try to find some appropriate way to recreate it in your own life. Shape an everyday experience so that the presence of God in the world of the ordinary becomes unmissable. Here is one example—the way I did this myself a few years back. While my family was out one afternoon, I prepared a meal for them. I gave myself a couple of hours to get it together, even though it was only a simple lasagna. First, I lit candles all around the kitchen. Then I put on a CD of worship music. I gathered all the ingredients on the kitchen work surface. Then I began to pray over them. I said grace over that

meal—before I even began cooking—with a thoroughness that has rarely been seen in history before or since. I gave thanks for every carrot *individually*. As I peeled, sliced, cut, and chopped, I prayed and sang. That meal was *sanctified*!

Then, while the lasagna was in the oven, I began to pray round the dining table. I stood over each chair and prayed for every family member one by one. In particular, I asked that during the meal I might be able to be attentive to the presence of God in the life of each person.

When the family came home I served up the lasagna. I doubt they noticed that anything was different—although, of course, they were not supposed to notice; this was a celebration of God's presence in the ordinary. But I noticed! It was the most prayerful, spiritual, Godsoaked meal I had ever eaten. It helped me to see something of the inward, spiritual grace of God flowing through my outward, physical world. It was a sacrament.

You might want to try something similar. How can you make your paperwork or morning email into a sacramental act? Delivering the mail? Having breakfast with your pre-schooler? Walking the dog? Drinking coff ee at Starbucks? Standing on the assembly line? Driving the car? Meeting a friend for lunch? You do not have to do anything odd or peculiar; the point of the exercise is not to draw attention to yourself—rather the opposite, in fact. That which is truly sacramental is the most ordinary of all. It is about shifting your viewpoint, learning to see the world in a new way, discovering how to be attentive to God amongst the everyday.

Open to beauty

If we want to go a little deeper into sacramental life, we might want to begin immersing ourselves more deeply in the experience of art. All great art is an exploration of the relationship between the visible, material world and our inward, spiritual experience. Art is always expressed through physical media—sound, movement, color, texture, shape, writing. Yet it is constantly trying to push into something deeper and further, into the realm of the spirit. Engaging with art opens us to the spiritual dimension of the material world.

For some of us an exploration of art might mean exercising our gifts of creativity and expression to create new art—music, song, painting, sculpture, architecture, and so forth. It is a tremendous blessing to be able to both expand your own spirit into the arts and also to draw others into that journey alongside you.

But many more of us might be painfully aware of our lack of gifts in these areas. If that is you, you are in good company—me too! But even if we cannot really create art, we can learn to engage with it. We can open ourselves to symphonies, paintings, novels, operas that can open our hearts and spirits to life, other people, and God. Over the centuries the church has had a rather hot and cold relationship with the arts—sometimes strongly encouraging artists to use their gifts to the glory of God, and supporting their eff orts generously and enthusiastically; and at other times looking on art with suspicion or dismay. We are fortunate to be living at a time when many churches are more open to the arts and fi nding ways to engage with artists creatively and thoughtfully. We can take advantage of that openness in our own lives.

A final word

The world around us is beautiful, glorious, and delightful—even in its fallen, broken state. God rejoices and marvels in it, and invites us to do the same. And in the incarnation of Jesus we can begin to glimpse the eternal significance of our everyday, mundane lives—our families and workplaces, our neighborhood and communities. Our daily lives, our small concerns, our meals and conversations, our friendships, our hobbies and interests—we begin to see that all these are invested with a deep spiritual signifi cance in Christ. Th is outward, physical world is freighted with inward, spiritual grace for those with eyes to see. Your life is a sacrament, made holy by God's presence within it; you incarnate the life of Christ in your home, your church, your community. I pray that you might find ways to see this astounding reality for yourself—and begin to live into it!

Excerpted from the Renovaré USA website. For this and other helpful resources please visit www.renovare.us

Christopher S Webb

Chris Webb is a former President of Renovare, a Benedictine Anglican Priest, writer, speaker and Vicar of the United Parish of Lampeter in rural Wales.