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Comment - The 150th anniversary of the birth of WB Yeats

Bishop Kevin Doran at Evensong in Saint Columcille's Church, Drumcliffe, on the occasion of the opening of the Yeats International Summer School and the 150th anniversary of his birth.

The poetry of WB Yeats stands out among the memories of my school days, together with the Geometry of Euclid, the Gospel according to Saint Luke and the characteristic colour of copper sulphate. With apologies to the lyrics of Sam Cooke, I don't know much about Chemistry; don't know much Geometry" but I do see a connection between faith and poetry and that connection is "mystery".

When it comes to art of any kind, I wouldn't regard myself as an expert by any means, and it would be stepping outside my brief to present myself as either an apologist for Yeats or a critic of his work. William Butler Yeats was born into

the Church of Ireland. I was interested to discover some years ago that his two sisters, Lily and Lolly had produced the vestments which were used at the International Eucharistic Congress in 1932. My grandmother, who was skilled in embroidery worked with them. She was of that generation who would say “I was talking to Mrs. Jones this morning, a lovely woman, a protestant of course, but a lovely woman all the same.”

W.B. Yeats, although he came from an Orthodox Anglican background, was not what one would describe as a mainstream Christian. He read widely in world religions and seems to have drawn on the wisdom of all of them, as well as dabbling in the occult. The result is a poetry rich in mystery and symbolism. One of the great gifts that artists offer in every generation is the possibility of capturing and expressing a culture in words and images.

We have listened this evening to a reading from the prophet Isaiah, in which he describes an encounter with the Glory of God, seated on a throne with a cloud around his head. He describes his sense of unworthiness in the face of the mystery of God. Yet, he is reassured, his lips are cleansed and he feels able to offer himself as a voice for God’s word. In the

Scriptures, the encounter with God is often spoke on as happening on a mountain, covered in cloud. Benbulben, with or without its cloud cover; Wild Swans at Coole, the tranquillity of the Hazel Wood and sunrise over Lough Gill are all manifestations of the mystery of creation.

Much of the time we are too busy to notice, but when we do pause to contemplate, words often fail us. It is the poet who gives us words, and helps us to engage with the mystery. As Pope John Paul II wrote, in his Letter to Artists in 1999, "*true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience*".

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes the encounter between St. Paul and the people of Athens. It was immediately clear to Paul that these were a cultured people. He refers to the insight of some of the Greek poets that we humans are "the offspring of God". God was represented in many ways in the Areopagus, but there was one statue which particularly attracted St. Paul, the statue to the unknown God.

To use, once again, the words of Pope John Paul II:

"*Every genuine artistic intuition goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality's surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery. The intuition itself springs from the depths of the human soul, where the desire to give meaning to one's own life is joined by the fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things. All artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands, however successful it may be, and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardour of the creative moment.* (Letter to Artists, 1999)

The mystery acknowledged in the Areopagus was, in a sense, the meeting point of faith and art. The artist draws our attention to the mystery, but it is only by faith that we penetrate the mystery and encounter the One who is by his very nature, Good and Beautiful and True.

A few days ago, I was walking with a friend on the Sligo Way and we stopped for a few moments to rest. I became aware of small airplane flying in a wide circle over the Ox Mountains. The words that came to me were the words of William Butler Yeats. Where memory failed to go beyond the first five or six lines, Google came to the rescue.

I know that I shall meet my fate,
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

On a first reading, it might be taken simply as a romantic poem about the wastefulness of war, but the more I read it, the more I feel that Yeats has recognised, almost before it came, something of the spirit of our age. The airman is not motivated by a desire to serve, or even by any strong resentment of the enemy, but simply by "a lonely impulse of delight". He was living for the moment, experiencing life without any deep sense of purpose. One might describe him as the quintessential individualist.

It seems to me that Yeats has identified one of the major challenges of our culture, namely the fact that young people today are growing to maturity in a world which lacks permanence and continuity. We are defined as much by our transcience as by anything else; we are mobile in our careers, we require mobility in our technology, we accept and, perhaps, expect mobility in our domicile and even in our key relationships. Our approach to mystery is more often to try out a whole range of experiences, trying to find something that will make us happy. It is a culture in which commitment to any one project or any other person is very challenging. It seems that only a personal encounter with the mystery of a God who loves us can restore our sense of purpose and our sense of direction.

Going back to the Areopagus, we see that St. Paul encourages the Athenians to think of God, not as a mythological creature formed in our imagination or even something beautiful, fabricated by human hands in gold and silver, but rather as someone “in whom we live and move and have our being”. He invites them to encounter the mystery made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

For ourselves, this evening, we give thanks to God for the gift of Yeats, and we give thanks to

Yeats in so far as he has opened us up to mystery and, perhaps, even to the mystery of God.

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This homily was preached at Saint Colmcille's Church, Drumcliff on Sunday 26 July 2015 , on the occasion of the opening of the Yeats International Summer School and the 150th anniversary of his birth.