

# Sermon for St Francis High Heaton

Fourth Sunday of Easter Year B  
22<sup>nd</sup> April 2018

followed by the APCM



*Good Shepherd detail from mural  
in St Blaise Chapel Lincoln Cathedral  
by Duncan Grant (1885-1978)*

Acts 4:5-12  
Psalm 23  
1 John 3:16-23  
John 10:11-18



The good shepherd usually prompts a sermon on shepherding, in all its various guises. But for me the word "good" is interesting....

In the New Testament the usual Greek word for "good" is *agathos*.... "*good* teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk 10:17); "can anything *good* come from Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46) "we know that God causes all things to work for *good* for those who love God" (Rom 8:28). This word for good means *useful* or *beneficial*. It doesn't have a moral quality as in "good or bad". The word *good* comes from the same old root as *gather*: in other words something is good which is held together or is *beneficial*; hence a godparent is not a godly parent but a *good* parent, one who is beneficial to a child. In fact the idea of good meaning moral character is relatively recent! Terms like *the good book* for the bible was first used only in 1801, and concepts like a *good sport* and a *good deed* arrived with late Victorian public schools in a culture of moral improvement. Prior to that to speak of someone being *good* meant someone who was balanced and beneficial, rather than necessarily useful for something or morally good. Meanwhile, the word St John uses for the *good shepherd* is none of these, he calls the shepherd *kalon*, which is closer to beautiful: not so much I am the *good* shepherd, he is not a morally good person or even someone good at being a shepherd, but a *beautiful* shepherd, or the most beautiful image of shepherding you can imagine!

So what makes a beautiful shepherd beautiful? *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder* is another Victorian catchphrase... but this has caught *my* eye because before I came here I asked one of the friars what I should aim to do at St Francis Church, and he said I should aim to make it *beautiful*.

To think about what makes a church beautiful I want to share with you an essay called *The Analysis of Beauty* by William Hogarth (1697-1764) who suggests six principles, which independently affect beauty. It would be hard to point to their specific influence, but together they provide a good framework for our life together as a church.

The first principle of beauty Hogarth describes is **Fitness**, which is not in itself a source of beauty, but can be described as a material cause of it. In other words, is it fit for purpose? Does it do what it says on the tin? A church has got to look and feel like a church and act like a church. That is why the values that we have been exploring are so important: a place for worshipping God, experiencing community and serving others, this is the heart of our mission statement found in our annual report: *St. Francis Church exists to reveal Christ through worship and loving service and supports the building of community.*

Hogarth's second principle of beauty is **Variety**. He writes "sameness", a lack of variety, offends the senses. "The ear is

as much offended with one even continued note, as the eye is with being fix'd to a point, or to the view of a dead wall". In a church this means we celebrate difference, we rejoice in variety, that we are people of different ages, and different cultures, and different outlooks. This can also be a source of difficulty, because variety creates differences of opinion and differences of style and character, but if we were all the same we would not be capable of being beautiful!

The third notion of beauty is **Regularity** which is a form of "composed variety": I guess this means that although we have variety, the variety is within a constant structure, which for us is the faith we share. We believe in God, who made us, redeems us and gives us life. A simple *shared* faith pushes us toward Hogarth's fourth definition of beauty which is **Simplicity**, which he says "enhances the pleasure of variety in that it pleases the eye". I think the simplicity of the architecture of our building is a case in point, and articulates a Franciscan character, simple lines, no fancy decoration or too much fiddly detail or embellishment to distract us from God or from each other.

You'll have noticed that Hogarth's aspects of beauty have a certain contrariness, and so the fifth principle sounds the opposite of simplicity because it is **Intricacy**. But I think this is a really important aspect of beauty because what makes a painting a work of art rather than just a picture will be the

depths to which it invites you, its layers of meaning, its drawing on other images and traditions, the way in which it invites you on a journey. Hogarth describes this as "pursuit", he writes *Every difficulty in understanding or grasping the object enhances the pleasure of overcoming it, to continue the pursuit*. I think this is especially true in a church where we inhabit the mystery of God, and invite people to share with us in the complexity of the universe rather than neglect its truth and wisdom. This means a church is a place where science and knowledge are respected and valued, including psychology and psychiatry, as much as biology, chemistry and physics. God is the source of everything, and as the writer of Genesis I put it, everything was "good"... a word in Hebrew which in Greek is translated as kalon: *beautiful*, the very same word St John uses of the good shepherd....

The final aspect of beauty is **Quantity**. This does not mean a large amount, rather it is what we would call "sublime" where sublime means "beyond ourselves", "to a higher level". The artist recognises a great *quantity* to have an aesthetic effect on the beholder without the necessity of a varietal or fitting form. This is why a pile of bricks or a cow in formaldehyde can be a work of art! It also means that often unexpected and even mundane or ridiculous aspects of church life can infer the divine, and make us *beautiful*.

And if not, then we must also be *fit for purpose, varied*, but also *regular* (having some sense of order); *simple*, yet also *intricate*, and all the while lifting people to a *higher meaning*.

There are so many ways that we might see that the beautiful shepherd invites us into this way of being throughout the gospel. The Greek word for gospel is *euangelion*, the prefix *eu-* also means good, so in the gospel (the *good* news) of John, the very line which precedes "I am the beautiful shepherd" is "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10b). That means life without limitation which is life indeed, which is the purpose and goal of our faith: to live without fear or constraint of death, and the myriad ways human nature conspires to reduce our beautiful sense of our beautiful selves, created and made beautiful by a beautiful God, who leads us as a beautiful shepherd.