

Comment

The Power of Words

For the past few weeks Edinburgh, which is often thought to be taciturn rather than loquacious in its character, has been an intensely verbal city. Its inhabitants have been surrounded by a torrent of words, spoken and set to music. In a society like ours in which public thrift and economy are prized and which runs the risk of knowing the price of everything and the value of very little, such generosity with any kind of commodity or resource might appear surprising. After all words are cheap, or so we often think; they cost nothing. But then are they so cheap? Are they so powerless to affect the way we think and act? Surely if that were the case then poets and dramatists, sinners and dancers, artists and players would be wasting their time.

All of the words that were spoken and sung during the Edinburgh Festival over the past few weeks have had a transforming effect. The entire city became a theatre. The space provided by drama allows us to explore some of the vital questions that affect our lives. This has been so right from the great dramas of classical Greece in which the great themes of humanity were carefully explored and exposed. In many ways these themes have not changed, they are still with us in our own search for meaning, our desire for some kind of basic underlying plot that will make sense of what often appears to be a random series of events. The Greeks were threatened by the arbitrariness of the Gods, how it could be that humanity should be subject to what often appeared to be blind fate; they were concerned about the difficulties that could ensue when an individual's personal integrity seemed to clash with the interests of the state; they wrote of the miseries of war and the cynical exercise of power politics and they also found space to speak of the redemptive power of love and compassion. All of these things concern us still. We are affected by them. We want to hear about them. That is why words are dangerous and that is why philosophers like Plato wanted to curb the work of poets and artists. They were possessed of too much transforming power.

Perhaps, because we are so generous with our words and opinions, we have rather underrated their effect. There is a story about a monastery in the fourth century which suggests that this is not a new problem. One of the brethren once asked the abbot if holy men always

knew when the power of God was in them. The abbot answered that they did not always know it. For once there was a very great hermit who had a disciple who did something wrong and the hermit said to him, "Go and drop dead!" Instantly the disciple fell down dead and the hermit, overcome with terror, prayed to the Lord to bring back the disciple to life promising that from then on he would be careful of what he said. Fortunately, his prayer was answered and the disciple was brought back to life. What that illustrates, apart from the fact that in the best-run monasteries with the most saintly of superiors there are still one or two personal difficulties to be ironed out now and again, is that we have to be careful what we say because we do not often understand fully the effect it will have.

In many ways this should come as no surprise to us because the whole of our faith is riddled with the notion of the power of the Word. We believe that our God is a God who speaks, who reveals himself to us in both word and deed. At the dawn of creation he spoke and all that is came into being. The word of God is dynamic and creative; it brings something out of nothing. The word of God is not only a word, it is a concrete reality, a dramatic event. It is a sign of his power and his presence. It is through that power that we celebrate the transforming drama of the sacraments. At the heart of the liturgical celebration of each of these seven signs there is a very simple action accompanied by a simple form of words. These words and actions go together and make Christ present under the form of visible material signs. God and humanity encounter each other in the space of the risen Christ, by speaking the transforming word we in turn are changed, by receiving and responding to the Word of God communicated to us in sacramental form we too are made part of the way that word is spoken in the world; we too become words of God.

The word we speak is, as St Paul says, the Word of the Cross. In the drama of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see our own story told, our own history unravelling. The Word of the Cross is our word of life. It is a hard word to carry, a hard word to speak and a hard word to understand. But until we have spoken that word our journey is not over and our vocation is unfulfilled.

AJW