

5 July 2009

## 'Craftsman's Art and Music's Measure'

**Exodus 31:1-11; 1 Chronicles 25:1-7**

William Morris was probably the most important pioneers of mass production in Britain. He was born near Worcester in 1877, grew up in Oxford and was apprenticed to a local cycle dealer and repairer. At the tender age of 16 he set up his own bicycle workshop which was very lucrative to do as Oxford was a University town with an abundance of bicycles. He soon opened a cycle shop and then began manufacturing small numbers of cycles for sale.

But Morris was an enterprising businessman: had Sir Alan Sugar been looking for apprentices a century ago, he would surely have been hired! In 1901 he branched out into motorcycle manufacture and repair, and a year later he opened his first garage to service and repair the new-fangled motor cars. Morris's experience in constructing motor cycles meant that a venture to manufacture cars was an obvious extension of his business, and that was precisely what he started to do in 1912, from a factory in Cowley, Oxford. Inspired by the example of Ford in America, he pioneered production line assembly rather than the more expensive hand building, and the "Bullnose" Morris established itself at the cheaper end of the market.

The rest, as they say, is history: the company expanded rapidly in the years after the First World War, with the opening or acquisition of numerous factories in Oxford, Abingdon, Birmingham and Swindon. By the mid 1940's William Morris was the richest self-made man in Britain (which makes you wonder if he could have sold his cars even more cheaply) and, in 1946, he was ennobled in recognition of his services to British Industry. When he died in 1963 motoring, for better or ill, had come to the masses. His products – together with those of Austin, Ford and many others - had changed Britain for ever.

But there was another William Morris who would have been horrified at the deeds of his namesake. Born nearly 50 years earlier, in 1834, this William Morris was a furniture and textile designer, an artist, a poet and writer, a propagator of socialist ideas and, above all, an architect. As a young man, he had gone up to Oxford with the aim of studying for Holy Orders but he soon decided that reforming society was more important than religion. The rest of his life was driven by the ideal of social change being brought about through art and beauty – perhaps not a bad aim in the climate of the appalling and crowded cities which had sprung up during the Industrial Revolution.

As a committed socialist and medievalist Morris was horrified by mechanization and mass-production in the arts; he dreamed of re-establishing the values of traditional craftsmanship and simplicity of design. His slogan was that art should be "by the people, for the people". With some artistic friends he set up a small firm to design and sell products that conformed to his philosophy and the company soon made a name for itself as a high quality producer of items as stained glass, wallpaper, textiles, and furniture, often with a floral or foliage motif. Many of us can find his designs in our houses today.

But there was an inherent contradiction in Morris' products, a fact which caused him great distress. The cost of producing these quality items by hand meant that they were too pricey for ordinary people. Ordinary people had no choice but to buy factory-made furniture and textiles and possibly his energies would have been better spent in encouraging beauty and good design in these. Nevertheless, Morris' efforts went far beyond the success of his company, and gave rise to a whole new interest in the medieval period, which led to the Arts and Crafts Movement, and even to later 20th century concepts such as Art Nouveau. Even today, Morris's ideas on the value of simplicity and the importance of the individual craftsperson are still with us today.

Well, those contradictions between factory production and craftsmanship are still with us today, although companies such as Ikea have perhaps done something to bridge that gap. But, of course, there is a

huge difference between the satisfaction of an item that has been lovingly brought to life out of raw materials by an individual or a small group of workers who have been intimately involved in its creation, and the soulless repetition of the man or woman on the production line who has to spend all day performing one small action out of hundreds and who has no real idea of how his work fits into the wider scheme of things. Fortunately that is changing: robot machines now do much of the routine drudgery in factories and small groups of workers often have the responsibility of seeing through the whole creative process of their product from start to finish.

This morning we are in the midst of a flower festival which celebrates both the beauty of what God has made and also the craftsmanship of human beings. As we look around the church we can see arts and textiles and calligraphy and even model trains: all of these are items which have been carefully made by people to give enjoyment and satisfaction to themselves and, often, to other people. Equally as we have worshipped we have been inspired by music which has lifted us above the commonplace routines of life and made Sunday special.

And so I would like to say something about craftsmanship and creativity from a Christian perspective. I think this is important because there are some Christians who don't seem to be interested in these things or moved by beauty; as far as they are concerned they could just as easily worship in a plain concrete box of a building with green lino on the floor, bright orange stacking chairs to sit on and the most banal music. Equally there are others - not as many as there once were - who seem to have turned the trappings and ritual of worship into an end in itself and who, it appears, are almost worshipping beauty in itself. That tendency to perfection for its own sake must always be resisted; after all, it is God himself we worship, not even the most lovely things created by human hands.

So what I want to do is make a number of affirmations this morning about creativity, craftsmanship and beauty. And the most basic of those affirmations is this: that we believe our human capacity to create things derives from God himself, it is part of being human and it is part of what the Bible means when it says that we bear God's image within us.

You see, I believe that our God is a creative God. I'm not going to go into arguments about how he creates; but the fact is that he spoke, and the world was brought forth into being. We can read the poetic or mythic account of creation in Genesis. We are told that the last part of creation, the part closest to his being and heart, was humanity. And I believe that we have been made with unique powers to create things as well: we can perceive beauty and art, and above all we have the capacity to be original and take our creativity into new directions.

For, you might say, there are animals who create the most intricate structures – and you would be right. Spiders make webs, bees make honeycombs, termites make giant anthills, beavers make lodges. I'm well aware of that. But none of them sit down and design what they are making: it's an instinctive process. None of them think about how their design might be adapted or improved; it is done the way it's always been done. And, crucially, none of them critically surveys their completed work, draws in their breath and says, "Mmm. That's beautiful and it's the best one yet". Only humans – following God's example when he looked on his work and said, "That's good" – have the ability to do that. Creativity and craftsmanship come from him.

The second thing I want to say is that the human spirit is enhanced by beauty, colour and good design. I don't think any of us would dispute that: all of us have been uplifted by looking at a beautiful garden or a majestic waterfall, parts of the natural world. In this we follow the Psalmists who reflected on the majesty of the universe, or who lifted their eyes up to the hills. But we also find our lives enhanced by man-made objects: when we look at a picture which is a blaze of colour, or admire someone's intricate embroidery, or listen to beautiful music: these are things which refresh our spirit (which is why many hospitals have pictures on the walls and sculptures in the grounds). And, by the way, I find it so sad that many people, simply dismiss all these things as nothing more than elitist culture – that is the attitude which led to the building of grim housing estates in Eastern Europe which were little more than grey concrete boxes and depressed people before they even started living in them.

One person who realized the truth of this was a man named Frank Pick. He is totally unknown to most

people yet his ideas have had an influence on millions: for Frank Pick was the man who introduced design into the London Underground in the 1920s and 30s. When he became the system's manager, he inherited an absolute jumble of branches and stations. He realised that he had to create a more coherent system that was easy to use; but there was more than that. As an idealist as well as a pragmatist, he saw the Underground as not just a train network, but a civilising agent, believing that people could be uplifted and redeemed by good design. This is what he once wrote:

“Underneath all the commercial activities of the Board, underneath all its engineering and operation, there is the revelation and realisation of something which is in the nature of a work of art ... It is, in fact, a conception of a metropolis as a centre of life, of civilisation, more intense, more eager, more vitalising than has ever so far been obtained”. Many people who use the Tube today would smile at this high-flying prose – partly because Frank Pick's principles have largely been lost. But is it too much to suggest that those principles – and also Pick's modesty, drive and diligence - stemmed from his upbringing as a Congregationalist in Spalding, where he was born in 1878, and from the faith which he kept all his life? I think not.

Time is pressing against us; but I want to make one final point, which is this. Each human being has been given creative gifts and talents; those gifts are to be used to do the work of God. That is what happened in both our Bible readings: in the first, skilled craftsmen were employed to make all the fittings and furniture for the Tabernacle while, in the second, musicians and singers were appointed to enhance worship in the Jewish Temple. All used their gifts for God's service.

Now I need to unpack this just a little, if only because many people – myself included! – will say, “I'm not 'arty', I have nothing to offer God in this way”. And of course it's true that few of us are budding Leonardo da Vincis or Felix Mendelssohns or whatever. And yet most, if not all of us, can do something creative – even if that is only putting some nicely-arranged pots of geraniums into our garden to soften the bare concrete or laying the table properly for guests instead of leaving all the plates and cutlery in an untidy heap! Furthermore, we have a responsibility before God to use our gifts to the best of our abilities: we were created to do good works and that means we must neither be lazy nor slipshod in whatever we do. We can see the outworking of those principles in the displays around church today: it would have been easy to simply shove the flowers into vases in any old manner and just place a few crafty items haphazardly on some tables; but that isn't what people have done and the effect is far more attractive.

But I do want to add two little footnotes to this. One is something that I have touched on already: it is the fact that nonconformist Christians have not always been renowned for their attitude to arts and crafts. It was the High Church or “Oxford” movement in the 19th century which said that beauty was glorifying to God and spoke of him as the Creator, especially within worship and church buildings. May I contrast this with the criticism of worship recently made by a team of inspectors at a Baptist training college: “There were too many incidental mistakes and errors by the leaders of worship, with visual material poorly presented and other ways in which the technology was not well enough prepared and use .... We were not convinced that the best was being offered to God”. Let us make worship as good as we can and let us use creative arts within it to engage our senses.

The other footnote hardly needs saying, but we all know that it is true: there is a dark side to human creativity. For there are many people - far too many in fact - who are using their talents in devising weapons of war which kill and maim in ever-more ingenious ways. These are not just terrorists but well-meaning people in honest employment. Now I realise that the exigencies of having to earn their daily bread may leave them with little choice. But I think one must still ask to what extent should Christians, servants of the Prince of Peace, be using their gifts to create instruments of death? And, quite apart from all this, there are many other people who are using their skills and gifts in creating ephemeral products and fatuous experiences which contribute nothing to humanity except more profits to those who make and sell them. Can that enhance God's glory? Surely he never meant us to create death or tat.

So let us dedicate whatever gifts we have to God, whether that be within the church, among our neighbours or in the community. Those gifts may not, of course, be artistic; you may sing like a frog or draw rather less well than a five-year old child ; you may feel that you cannot make anything because your hands are all fingers and thumbs. But don't fall into the trap of saying to yourself, “I haven't got any gifts to offer” – which is not only false modesty but almost blasphemy to a God who has given all of us

abilities and talents. For you may be able to make the cakes we mentioned earlier; you may be a dab hand at accounting or even just in saying the right words to people at the right time.

So let us all use whatever gifts God has given to us: never in a slipshod or haphazard manner, always to the best of our ability, hopefully to enhance human life; and with the ultimate aim of bringing glory not to ourselves, but to him, the Lord who created us.