

Seeing in New Ways – Justice, Mercy and Social Wellbeing through the Arts

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Abstract

‘Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution, justice without mercy is cruelty’ (St Thomas Aquinas, 1951; Bagnasco, 2008). There are many such statements concerning the symbiotic relationship between justice and mercy, which at the same time insinuate social wellbeing and the development of a fuller human potential.

This paper argues that contemplating or “dwelling upon” art (cf. van Kaam & Muto, 1978) is one significant, yet underdeveloped, way not only of observing the interface between justice, mercy and social wellbeing but of cultivating each quality within one’s life and community. In doing so it suggests a number of intersections between these themes, selected quotations, and a range of artistic works (principally painting, photography and sculpture) and proposes possible dynamics underpinning such a three-fold connection, indeed ‘worldview’, embracing these themes (Wise, 2004). Finally, it also seeks to explain why the lens of art is useful, and arguably essential, for exploring such themes and values within theological education and other areas (Mudge, 2009; Egan, 1978).

Introduction – The art of mercy

If I was to ask you (the reader) to associate a work of art with the theme of “mercy” – which one would you nominate?

Perhaps you might opt for one of the perennial favourites? – Picasso’s “Weeping woman”; Rembrandt’s “The Return of the Prodigal Son”; Goya’s “The Third of May 1808”, Van Gogh’s “Self-portrait with bandaged ear”, Sieger Köder’s “Home – the invitation poster” (for the Year of Mercy), Caravaggio’s “The Seven Works of Mercy” (refer to Image 1 below), or even William Etty’s “Mercy interceding for the Vanquished”.¹

Or perhaps you would choose a *different* artwork?

All the aforementioned works are paintings. However, I want to spend the time that we have exploring a range of artworks on mercy and what they can teach us – ranging from paintings to sculpture and other media. This paper focuses on six artworks, each with a specific focus

¹ . Websites on which you can view some of these images, all retrieved on 7/03/16, are as follows: Picasso’s “The weeping woman”, <http://www.pablocicasso.org/the-weeping-woman.jsp> ; Rembrandt’s “Prodigal Son”, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Return_of_the_Prodigal_Son_\(Rembrandt\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Return_of_the_Prodigal_Son_(Rembrandt)) ; The reader can find other artworks by Google Imaging the artist’s name or the title of the artwork referred to throughout this paper.

on mercy. In each case I reflect on a number of aspects related to mercy. I then place the artwork in conversation with scripture, spiritual writers, philosophers, artists and many other sources, to see if any fresh insights emerge from that artwork. The artworks examined in this paper are, each accompanied by a specific ‘mercy focus’, are as follows:

1. *Jesus cures the woman with the flow of cash*, by Peter Mudge (2005)

Focus: Mercy heals through the wound and the ‘bleeding’

2. Pope Francis – Image from his ministry of mercy (2013 ff)

Focus: Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy

3. *Come sit awhile*, by Gael O’Leary (2014)

Focus: An Australian focus on mercy as listening

4. *Fish*, by Thomas Merton (1964)

Focus: Mercy within mercy within mercy

5. *The Longest Journey*, by Anna Maria Pacheco (1994)

Focus: Mercy as perilous journey

6. *Memorial for unborn children*, by Martin Hudáček

Focus: Healing and mercy through the child that never was but still is.

Two prefacing issues – seeing and worldview

Looking is not seeing

Many of the so-called “powers” often associated with art are not magical or mystical. They are often associated with privileged insight and ‘vision’ depending in large part on what we see or don’t see. The way that we see affects everything. Australian artist Brett Whiteley has asserted: “The most fundamental reason one paints is in order to see.”² As John Navone observes about ‘creation’ in a broad sense, and parables in a more specific context:

We, too, can begin to look on our creation the way Genesis depicts God as looking on all creation. When this begins to occur, delight rather than dissatisfaction becomes the lens through which all is perceived...[and so] the spirit of chronic dissatisfaction is replaced by the spirit of the One who first looked on creation and pronounced it “good”.³



Image 1 – Caravaggio, "The Seven Works of Mercy", 1607, Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples. Image in the public domain.

². Tony Thomas. ‘In Dialogue with the Muse of Art History: Brett Whiteley’. *Escape Into Life* (15 January 2017). Retrieved on 2/5/17 from: <http://www.escapeintolife.com/art-reviews/in-dialogue-with-the-muse-of-art-history-brett-whiteley/>

³. John Navone. ‘Finding God and Ourselves in Parables’. *Human Development* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 43.

The Purpose of the Parables

Jesus of Nazareth speaks about a related type of seeing and perceiving. In Matthew 13: 10-13 he elucidates the purpose of the parables, where the word ‘art’ easily could be substituted for ‘parables’. In fact artworks could be understood as parables embodied in the form of story, symbol, colour, texture, movement and so on. In a sense, Jesus is asking us to employ the parables as lenses that facilitate a ‘seeing with the soul’.⁴ Here is the passage:

Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. *The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’* (NRSV, my emphasis).

In like manner, the French novelist Marcel Proust (1900/1987) asserts that: ‘The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be *not* to visit strange lands *but* to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is.’⁵

In other words, the ultimate journey is to see differently, to see as another sees, and in the process discern entire new universes. Art, potentially, can invest us with that possibility. To see is actually to wake up, to pay attention, and thus ‘see’ in a new light. Therefore art is teaching us to see justice, mercy and social wellbeing in new ways, ways that hopefully are transformative.

Worldview

One of the most recent definitions of ‘worldview’ and certainly one of the most useful for the fields of theology, ministry and religious education, has been provided by James W. Sire. Notice the room that Sire allows in the ensuing quote to accommodate insights from the arts, from stories, and from the ‘being’ part of the word ‘human being’:

A *worldview* is a commitment [a set of propositions or a web of beliefs], a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.⁶

Sire’s definition also echoes a text in Acts 17: 27-28: In this passage, Paul recounts how many people throughout history ‘would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”’ (NRSV).

⁴ . J. Barrie Shepherd. *Seeing with the Soul: Daily meditations on the Parables of Jesus in Luke*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

⁵ . Marcel Proust. *In Remembrance of Things Past, Volume 5, The Prisoner*. Translated by C. K. S. Moncrief & F. A. Blossom in 2 Volumes. (New York: Random House, 1923 French, 1934 English translations), Vol 2, Ch 2, 164.

⁶ . James W. Sire. *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept, 2nd Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 141. Some text also added in brackets from 142.

Mercy and art are continually present, challenging our worldview. They tap into the fundamental orientation of our hearts. They are linked to stories. Both inform the ways in which we live and move and have our being. In the images and commentaries that follow my aim is to ‘dwell upon’ six different but complementary artworks. I interrogate them in relation to the meanings they might contain, and link them at the same time with passages from scripture, mystical writings, and other texts.

One final caveat. The artworks that we examine below are trying to share their essential nature, insights or ‘worldview’. They are not interested in whether you like them or not. They are trying to say: ‘Please come over here and have a closer look. I want to show you something that you haven’t seen in quite the same way before, and that might transform your view of life’. Then each artwork secretly hopes that you will feel, think, imagine and act yourself into a new way of ‘seeing’ and ‘being’.

The art of justice, mercy and social wellbeing – selected works

Artwork 1. “Jesus cures the woman with the flow of cash” by Peter Mudge (2005)

Focus: Mercy heals through the wound and the “bleeding”

The first painting to be examined is one of my own (refer to Image 2). This work is housed in what I refer to as a “domestic gallery”, in the possession of the Episcopal parish of Atlanta, Georgia and is often used there as an exemplar in its sermons and in other settings.

The woman with the flow of cash (the right hand side figure in Image 2) is vulnerable or wounded. The red colour indicates that she is accustomed to regular bleeding. The root word behind “vulnerability” is the Latin *vulnus* meaning “wound”. To be vulnerable is to leave one’s wounds exposed. The wound is the site of both vulnerability and healing.⁷



Image 2 – ‘Jesus cures the woman with the flow of cash’ by Peter Mudge, 2005. Permission to reproduce image from the artist as author.

Here are some details that are required in order to deepen your understanding of the painting. The work appropriates some background images and colours from icons such as the mountain to the left behind the figure of Christ, who is a figure taken from a Duccio painting, ‘The calling of the apostles Peter and Andrew’ (1308/1311). The image of the woman on the left hand side has been taken from Jan Vermeer’s ‘Woman holding a balance’ (Woman weighing gold) (c. 1664). The woman also references another biblical woman with a flow of blood or haemorrhage, a pagan and outsider, afterwards cured by Jesus (Mark 5:25-34). Jesus (from all

⁷ . Miriam Greenspan, “Vulnerability: The Power of No Protection,” in *Healing through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear and Despair* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2003), 28-44.

ages in an ahistorical sense) is gesturing towards the woman who holds a credit card, stained on its right hand side with blood as is her inner tunic (refer to Image 3). She is pregnant with avarice and consumption, looking with greater longing at ‘things’ and ‘consumables’ rather than ‘people’.

Jesus gestures with compassion towards the woman. In some passages where Jesus responds with ‘compassion’, such as in Luke 7:13 (the cure of the widow of Nain’s son), the original Greek verb is *splagchnizomai*, (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη)⁸ ‘have pity, feel sympathy’ from the noun *splagchnon*, “inward parts, entrails,” figuratively, of the seat of the emotions, or in our common usage “heart.”⁹ From a Jewish perspective, Louis Jacobs points out that ‘compassion’ refers to feeling for another, for ‘the emotion of caring concern’ with the post-biblical Hebrew word originating from the word *rehem*, ‘womb’, originating in the idea of either motherly love or sibling love...in biblical Hebrew *rehamim*’.¹⁰ Abarim Publications Biblical Hebrew Dictionary states: ‘The parent noun of our verb is the masculine רַחַם (*rhm*; pronounced as *rehem* or *raham*), meaning womb (Genesis 49:25, Exodus 13:12, Jeremiah 20:17)’.¹¹ Jesus’ compassion reflects a key principal dominating the Year of Mercy in the Catholic Church: ‘The scandal of mercy excludes no one’. Indeed, as James Keenan asserts, mercy is scandalous precisely because it excludes no one. Keenan defines mercy as ‘the willingness to enter into the chaos of another.’¹²

Elsewhere in the painting, the woman touches a small table, a feature extracted from Andrei Rublev’s *Trinity* also known as *The Hospitality of Abraham* (1411 or 1425-27) which acts as an action threshold. The table is marked by five red wounds referring to the passion of Christ and his *stigmata* (perhaps shared by the woman?). There is a dark shadow on the closer side of the woman’s veil that resembles a hand of demonic possession.

I could refer to many other features – but I invite you to read the abovementioned passage from Mark, look at the painting, focus on mercy, and come up with your own interpretations. I sometimes ask viewers of this painting (of all ages) to propose speech bubbles for each aspect of a particular painting (in this case Jesus, the woman, the card, the table, the mountain, etc). What do you think Jesus is saying with respect to mercy? How does the woman respond – what type of cure is she requesting of Jesus?



Image 3 – Closeup detail of hand and credit card from Image 2 above.

⁸ . ‘Cognate: 4697 *splagchnízomai* – "from *splanxna*, 'the inward parts,' especially the nobler entrails – the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. These gradually came to denote the seat of the affections" (WS, 111)’. Retrieved on 14/5/16 from: <http://biblehub.com/greek/4697.htm>

⁹ . Source of Greek text insights: BAGD762; BAGD763; BAGD = Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Danker, Frederick. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Second Edition. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 762-763.

¹⁰ . Louis Jacobs. ‘Compassion’, in *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (Oxford: OUP, 2003/1995), 89.

¹¹ . Abarim Biblical Hebrew Dictionary for ‘רַחַם I’, retrieved on 15/5/16 from: <http://www.abarim-publications.com/Dictionary/r/r-ht-mfin.html#.Vzf30TV97IU>

¹² . James Keenan. ‘The scandal of mercy excludes no one’. *Thinking Faith*, 4 December 2015, p. 1.

A hermeneutic of aesthetics versus anaesthetics

Like Jesus in this and other narratives of compassionate ‘encounter’ (whether with tax collectors, lepers or prostitutes), the Jesus in this work is trying to open up a person or group to their full potential and reunite them with their family and community, and not close them down, isolate or condemn them.

Using modern parlance, we could say that this image challenges us to become people who champion ‘*aesthetics*’ (the arts) and proscribe ‘*anaesthetics*’ (for example, Brueggemann’s lament about the dearth of poetry in a prose-flattened world).¹³ We have the choice between freeing people and opening them up, or closing them down/shutting them out.

Sir Ken Robinson writes elsewhere on the same theme. His context is overuse of prescription drugs among young people in schools but his comments could be applied just as easily to myriad forms of other less detectable ‘drugs’ such as passivity, overloading students with information, inappropriate uses of technology, the disappearance of leisure, an inability to take student experience and narratives seriously, missing connections with the actual world, and lack of praxis applications for topics taught in isolation:

The arts are victims of this mentality. The arts especially address the idea of *aesthetic experience*. An aesthetic experience is one in which your senses are *operating at their peak*. When you are present in the current moment. When you are resonating with *anaesthetic* is when you *shut your senses off*, and deaden yourself to what is happening... We are getting our children through education by anaesthetising them. And I think we should be doing the *exact opposite*, we should *not be putting them to sleep*. We should be *waking them up*, to what they have inside of themselves.¹⁴

The silence of ‘waiting upon’ the painting

Like many great works by artists such as Vermeer, Caravaggio, Michelangelo and others, this painting ‘freezes the action’ at a crucial instant, at a time of *Kairos* or momentous decision. There is a silence in this painting, a space, a gap, a caesura. The work issues a demand to wait and pause awhile. It could be called an interval, a threshold, or type of ‘Sabbath.’ We need to ‘wait upon’ rather than ‘wait for’. We ‘wait for’ a bus. But we must ‘wait upon’ a person, mercy, forgiveness, or an artwork to reveal itself – perhaps when we least expect it.¹⁵

In her article ‘Waiting for Art’, Elizabeth Buhe reflects:

Spending time waiting does not arrest or accelerate perception, but rather *heightens* it. In everyday life, actuality is forever escaping our grasp – once we perceive something it is already past – already an artefact, a history. The same is not true in the museum [or art gallery] where, confronted by static objects [or even moving images], we are the ones with the agency to move. And we do move, until something captivates our gaze, entangles us. We choose to wait. What happens when these [artworks] grab a hold of

¹³ . Walter Brueggemann. ‘Introduction: Poetry in a prose-flattened world’. In *Finally comes the poet: Daring speech for proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 1-11.

¹⁴ . Sir Ken Robinson. YouTube clip: *Changing the Education Paradigm*. RSA Animate, uploaded 14 October 2010. Clip dialogue taken from 5.50 to 6.32 mins. Retrieved on 12/5/16 from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U> (my emphasises).

¹⁵ . Refer to waiting upon God beyond the silence in: Joseph Bentz. *Silent God* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2007), 73-88.

our attention and keep us there – looking, waiting? These works, which unfold in front of the viewer’s eyes, pull the viewer into the object’s temporal realm; this is a different conception of time’.¹⁶

This paper argues that contemplating or “dwelling upon” art in the context of one’s life is one significant, yet underdeveloped, way not only of observing the interface between justice, mercy and social wellbeing but of cultivating each quality within one’s life and community. As van Kaam and Muto have noted in relation to the spiritual life, which surely the arts feed into, the contemplative or ‘dwelling life’ is characterised by ‘quiet, attentive listening to God...contemplative dwelling upon the word...[leaving time] before God to drink in and savor the experience of his word coming alive in me. The fullness of my being meets the fullness of Divine Reality’.¹⁷

In my view, this painting, as for others discussed throughout this paper, returns us, not only to lost meanings of ‘waiting’, ‘dwelling’ and Sabbath, but to one of the fundamental meanings of mercy – and one linked to our own ethical behaviour as well as the attributes of God. Mercy at its most basic level is that benevolence, mildness or tenderness of heart which disposes a person to overlook injuries. It looks for the very best a person can be and treats them better than they would otherwise be treated. Mercy is tempered by justice, it forgives all (seventy times seven). It is a difficult concept to define but is perhaps nearest in meaning to ‘grace’. It implies all of but more than benevolence, tenderness, mildness, pity, compassion, justice and clemency.¹⁸



Image 4 – Closeup of hem of Jesus' garment and artist's signature from Image 2 above.

We sometimes believe that our definition of mercy is the best and is beyond dispute. However this moralistic tactic, referred to in ethics as ‘the high moral ground’ can be a dangerous one. “I am merciful and compassionate... (e.g. towards refugees, substitute your own phrase)”. Inference – if you disagree with me: “You are not merciful, or at least not as merciful as me. In fact you could be cold hearted”.¹⁹ As such, it is an ethical game endeavouring to position superiority over inferiority.

¹⁶ . Elizabeth Buhe. ‘Waiting for Art: The Experience of Real Time in Sculpture’. *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 1 (2011), 118. Website: <http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

¹⁷ . Adrian van Kaam & Susan Muto, *Am I Living a Spiritual Life: Questions and Answers on Formative Spirituality* (Denville, NJ: Dimension, 1978), 44-45.

¹⁸ . Based on the King James Version Dictionary definition of ‘merciful’. Retrieved on 21/3/16 from: <http://av1611.com/kjbp/kjv-dictionary/merciful.html>

¹⁹ . Refer to a thoughtful article on this topic by Helen Razer, ‘Refugees debate: let’s not use compassion as a self-serving device’, retrieved on 15/5/16 from: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/01/australian-immigration-and-asylum-australia> See also a good description of ‘high moral ground’ retrieved on 15/5/16 at ChangingMinds.org from: http://changingminds.org/techniques/resisting/high_ground.htm ‘Morals define right and wrong. Talking about what is moral, thus is talking about what is right and wrong. *Taking the moral high ground* is to become almost unchallengeable. If you are morally higher than others, then you not only are right, but you can even define what is right... When you take the high ground, it puts the other person into a moral double bind: if they argue against you, then they do not recognize what is moral.’

Artwork 2. Pope Francis – Image from a Ministry of Mercy

Focus: Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy

We now move to more contemporary reflections on mercy, this time through photography. Here we will briefly consider a photo of Pope Francis on the theme of mercy and align this with some of his statements on this theme. The image depicts Francis, as he was ending his weekly audience in St Peter's Square on Wednesday, turning his attention to the man who suffers from neurofibromatosis (refer to Image 5).



Image 5 – Pope Francis and his ministry of mercy to the marginalised, 7 November 2013. Photo: Claudio Peri. Copyright free image.

In his *Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee of Mercy* (11 April 2015), Pope Francis stated:

Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. The Father, "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4), after having revealed his name to Moses as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex34:6), has never ceased to show, in various ways throughout history, his divine nature... Whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (cf. Jn 14:9). Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God.²⁰

In the ensuing paragraphs he adds: 'The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person... Mercy, once again, is revealed as a fundamental aspect of Jesus' mission. This is truly challenging to his hearers, who would draw the line at a formal respect for the law. Jesus, on the other hand, goes beyond the law; the company he keeps with those the law considers sinners makes us realize the depth of his mercy'.²¹

²⁰ . Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee of Mercy [hereafter MV], 1 . (11 April 2015)

²¹ . Pope Francis, MV, 12 & 20.

Artwork 3. “Come sit awhile”, by Gael O’Leary (2014)

Focus: An Australian focus on mercy as listening

‘Come Sit Awhile’ is the title of the bronze sculpture of Catherine McAuley commissioned by the Sisters of Mercy Institute Leadership Team (refer to Image 6).

It was created by sculptress Gael O’Leary for the gardens of the Institute Centre at 33 Myrtle Street, Stanmore, New South Wales, Australia. Completed and installed in October 2014, Gael hoped that the sculpture would ‘be an inspiration and beacon of hope and comfort to all who come to sit beside her.’²²

Here I would like to cite the words of Natalie Acton, currently the Mercy Ethos Educator with the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, as well as a BBI/TAITE graduate from the institute where I teach:



Image 6 – ‘Come Sit Awhile’ sculpture by Gael O’Leary, 2014. Used with permission Sisters of Mercy, Australia and Papua New Guinea.

[Catherine McAuley] was a truly fine woman, very down to earth and inspirational. She was not very pious, was very practical, had a great sense of fun and was an astute businesswoman [skills from which] she brought into her religious life. She did not follow convention and ran a very egalitarian and empowering order – unusual for her time. Her spirituality was also very different- it was strongly influenced by Quakerism which meant among other things [that] she had a dexterity with scripture that is years ahead of her time both in terms of her knowledge and capacity to interpret it. She also had a love of silence, and saw God in everyday events and people, so she possessed a unique theological approach for people (let alone women) of her time.

She was known as a very good listener. You will note that she is not in a habit – she did run her ministry as a lay woman for 4 years until pressure from the church and a desire to secure the future of the project meant that she needed to form a religious order. She didn’t become a nun until she was 53 (something which she said that she never intended to do) and only lived to the age of 63 so spent most of her life as a lay woman.²³

My own interpretation of this sculpture of Catherine is that she challenges some of the more prominent tropes of contemporary culture – including the endless preoccupation with noise, busyness, sport, fashion, social media, cooking and do-it-yourself shows, which in many ways encapsulate the three temptations that Jesus experienced in the desert, and moreover cautioned us to recognise in life: success, status and power (Mark 1:12-13 and parallels).²⁴

²² . ‘Image and text used with permission of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea’; part of email text from Natalie Acton received 9 May 2016.

²³ . Email sent to me on 6 May 2016. Image courtesy of Natalie Acton; commentary on image with thanks to Sue Manester, Mercy Ethos Administration Assistant, and from the same Institute on the same date.

²⁴ . Richard Rohr, *Radical grace: Daily meditations by Richard Rohr*, ed. by John Feister (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1995), 294-297. In this series of reflections, Rohr uses the headings of success, righteousness and control, along with certain synonyms, such as those cited in the text above.

Artwork 4. “Fish” or “Christ Fish” by Thomas Merton (25 January 1964)

Focus: Mercy within mercy within mercy

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) once sanguinely observed: ‘Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time’.²⁵ This is the theme of kataphatic and apophatic perception that we will return to several times in this paper. Merton was a writer and Trappist monk at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, USA.

He has left us with many artworks, one of which is this image of a fish (refer to Image 7). It could be interpreted as a ‘Christ-fish’, scratched out, blurred, and seemingly trodden upon, disfigured and afterwards ignored. As such it could be read as a symbol of mercy, compassion and forgiveness – and thus key signs of God’s Reign as preached by Jesus.

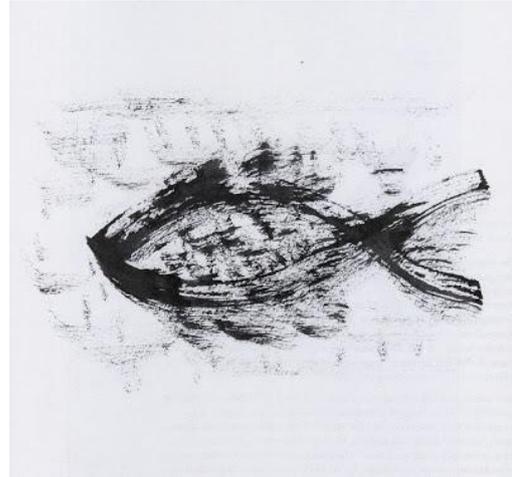


Image 7 – Thomas Merton brush drawing, Untitled, 1964. Photo: Beth Cioffoletti. Used with permission with inclusion of photographer’s name.

Roger Lipsey comments that Merton’s fish is an unpredictable one that swims against the current, moves into dangerous places, and is on some type of quest:

Merton could be counted on to produce a lively school of Christian fish, and he does not disappoint. ...The early work is jaunty and optimistic, slightly awkward, again full of promise. That sort of dynamism – energy large enough to swim against the current – was evident in Merton’s art from start to finish.’ Lipsey continues: ‘As Merton gained mastery of the brush, he continued from time to time to explore the emblem of the fish in ways increasingly impressive. ... This fish is not one to cradle in safe places, nibbling dreams. It is a fish on the move, a questing fish. ...’²⁶

Biblical scholar Roger S. Boraas has noted: ‘Sometime in early church life, the figure of a fish took symbolic value as the sign of the Christ. The acrostic [where certain letters stand for longer phrases or words] derived from the Greek letters of the word “fish” (*ichthys*) were understood to stand for the Greek words for “Jesus [*i*] Christ [*ch*], God’s [*th*] Son [*y*], Savior [*s*]” and the use of the symbol persists to this day in Christian iconography’.²⁷

In 1952 Merton wrote this passage in one of his journals, where he uses the name ‘Jonas’ as God’s address of intimacy for him:

‘The Voice of God is heard in Paradise:...

What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with my mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me,

²⁵ . Retrieved on 14/4/16 from: <https://www.pinterest.com/carman1247/thomas-merton/>

²⁶ . Roger Lipsey. *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston & London: New Seeds, 2006), 44-45. Cited by Beth Cioffoletti at: <http://fatherlouie.blogspot.com.au/2007/02/growth.html>

²⁷ . Roger S. Boraas. “Fish,” in Paul J. Achtemeier (gen. ed.). *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 311.

Jonas, my child? *Mercy within mercy within mercy*. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin'.²⁸

Merton also composed many prayers of mercy such as this one:

Lord, have mercy.
Have mercy on my darkness, my weakness, my confusion. Have mercy on my infidelity, my cowardice, my turning about in circles, my wandering, my evasions.
I do not ask for anything but such mercy, always, in everything, mercy...
Lord, have mercy. Guide me, make me want again to be holy, to be a man of God, even though in desperateness and confusion.
I do not necessarily ask for clarity, a plain way, but only to go according to your love, to follow your mercy, to trust in your mercy...'.²⁹

One of Merton's favourite images for God was 'a calm sea of mercy' (compare Image 8):

'[He] was convinced that the ultimate ground in which we all meet is that "Hidden Ground of Love" we call God. God can be named in many ways, yet God always remains a mystery that no words of ours can ever grasp. For Merton the image of preference [for God] was Mercy. "God," he wrote, "is like a calm sea of mercy."' ³⁰

This leads us into a distinctly maritime artwork of mercy but one, strangely enough, without a physical sea surrounding it.

Artwork 5. "The Longest Journey", by Anna Maria Pacheco (1994)

Focus: Mercy as perilous journey

Perhaps the first observation you might make about this artwork (refer to Image 9) is that it is a huge boat without a sea. The sea that should be there is only one that can be constructed by your imagination.



Image 8 – Avoca Beach, Central Coast, NSW with the Skillion, Terrigal in the background. July 2015. Photo by Peter Mudge.

God is a sea

So let us create one, a sea that is like God, courtesy of Blessed John of Ruysbroeck, a Flemish mystic who lived between about 1293/94 and 1381. He wrote in the Dutch

²⁸ . Thomas Merton, July 4 reflection, 'Mercy within mercy', in: Thomas Merton, *A Year With Thomas Merton, Daily Meditations from His Journals*, selected & edited by Jonathan Montaldo (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 194; originally published in Merton's journals, July 4, 1952, II. 488. The text also occurs in Merton's *Sign of Jonas*, 362. My emphasis.

²⁹ . Merton, 'A Year with Thomas Merton', 247; originally published in Merton's journals, August 2, 1960, IV.28.

³⁰ . William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), 52. Other passages on mercy can be found in: William H. Shannon & Christine M. Bochen (selected & edited), *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters, The Essential Collection* (Oxford: Lion, 2009), 128, 148, 166, 172, 200, 300.

vernacular, the language of the common people of the Low Countries, rather than in Latin, the language of the Church liturgy and official texts, in order to reach a wider audience.

Ruysbroeck has written a magical passage entitled: “God is a sea”:

This flowing forth of God always demands a flowing back; for God is a Sea that ebbs and flows, pouring without ceasing into all God’s beloved according to the need and the merits of each, and ebbing back again with all those who have been thus endowed both in heaven and on earth, with all that they have and all that they can. And of some God demands more than they are able to bring, for God is revealed as so rich and so generous and so boundlessly good. For God wishes to be loved by us according to the measure of God’s nobility, and in this all spirits fail; and therefore their love becomes wayless and without manner, for they know not how they may fulfil it, nor how they may come to it.’³¹

‘The Ship of Death’

Ana Maria Pacheco is a painter, sculptor and printmaker who was born in Brazil in 1943 and has lived in England since 1973. She is best known for her ensembles of sinister life-size figures in painted wood which comment especially on male cruelty and arrogance. Her work deals with issues of control and the exercise of power, drawing upon the tensions between the old world of Europe and the new world of her Brazilian birth.³²



Image 9 – ‘The Longest Journey’ by Anna Maria Pacheco, 1994. Permission has been sought from Pratt Contemporary Art, UK.

Some commentators note that Pacheco’s work is based on D. H. Lawrence’s 1933 poem, *The Ship of Death*.³³ ‘The Longest Journey’ looks both lifelike and other-worldly, so it makes sense when Pacheco states that she is exploring exile³⁴ and hope, power and inspiration, fear and the unknown in her work.³⁵ It is an artwork that invites us to dwell upon its details and wrestle with its ethical implications.

³¹ . John of Ruysbroeck (Jan Van Ruysbroeck). *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage, The Sparkling Stone & The Book of Supreme Truth*. Translated by C. A. Wynshenk, Edited and introduced by Evelyn Underhill. (London: John M. Watkins, 1951), Ch XL, 103-104.

³² . This text retrieved on 22/4/16 from: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/learning/associate-artist-scheme/ana-maria-pacheco> . More details can be found at: The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists (Oxford University Press) <http://artuk.org/discover/artists/pacheco-ana-maria-b-1943>

³³ . The full version plus a commentary on ‘The Ship of Death’ was retrieved on 15/5/16 from: <https://brilitwiki.wikispaces.com/theshipofdeath>

³⁴ . Refer to Daniel J. Fleming and Peter Mudge, ‘Leaving home: A pedagogy for theological education’. In L. Ball & J. R. Harrison. (eds.). *Learning and teaching theology: Some ways ahead* (Northcote, Victoria: Morning Star Publishing, 2014), 71-80.

³⁵ . From ‘Long Journey for Sculpture’, by Anne Morris (31 May 2012) retrieved on 15/5/16 from: http://www.salisburyjournal.co.uk/leisure/entertainments/9737019.Long_journey_for_sculpture/

Pacheco's sculpture includes a 32 foot (9.75 metres) life-size polychromed wooden boat. The figures within the boat are bigger than life-sized and include five ethereal figures clothed in creamy white (angels, guardians, threshold figures?) and five ordinary human figures – are they lost passengers in a life boat, refugees, escapees from war or persecution? The artist seeks to ask these questions, not necessarily to answer them; or approve of or proscribe certain responses. The artwork is there to make you think, but before that, artists (as Picasso, Tolstoy and many others claim) are more concerned to make you feel.³⁶ Only one thing seems to be certain – the passengers are travelling on a 'Ship of Death'.

The artwork also wants you to look at faces, bodily positions, and gestures as a key to the artist's intentions. Why is the young boy standing in the middle (clearly a key position) without any pants. He is higher than the others, perched on a chair, while the man in the back left hand corner gestures towards him – why? Is this arrangement associated for example with Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew 18:3: 'and [Jesus] said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"' (NRSV).

One could ask many more questions – for art works, like the Jewish Jesus' parables, as Zev Garber notes, are designed to provoke questions and conversation rather than answers and conversion.³⁷ For example, is the cluster of white 'communio' figures in the middle of the boat meant to reference the Holy Trinity? Another angel looks into the depths of the sea while the last looks out across the surface of the sea – do they symbolise respectively the apophatic and kataphatic stances on knowing and spirituality? Many such questions are, in the end, unanswerable and are what educators, such as Gore and Harpaz, would call 'problematic knowledge'³⁸ or an 'undermining question'³⁹ – they have more than one answer, and those answers are often contradictory.

There are many ways to interpret this artwork and to associate it with numerous issues. Perhaps some will respond to this artwork by viewing the occupants as refugees or asylum seekers? One refugee named Qasim stated in the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference statement of 2008, entitled 'A Rich Young Nation':

I want to feel the responsibility of being part of society...I don't want to be a burden on society. I have the ability to be productive, to build and participate. Why don't they give me a chance to use my

³⁶ . Chloë Ashby, 'These artists want you to feel something' (29/11/13) retrieved on 15/5/16 from:

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/11/29/these-young-artists-want-you-to-feel-something.html>

³⁷ . Refer to this summary of the Jewish' Jesus focus in: Zev Garber. "The Jewish Jesus: Conversation not Conversion," *Hebrew Studies* 56 (2015), 385-392.

³⁸ . Jenny Gore asserts that 'problematic knowledge' is present when: 'students are required to present or analyse alternative perspectives alternative perspectives; and/or solutions and to demonstrate how the construction of and/or solutions relates to their understanding of the task,...moreover this knowledge is not fixed as right/wrong. Source: retrieved on 15/5/16 from: Elizabeth Cortois, 'Introduction to the Quality Teaching Framework of Pedagogy', p. 13 at:

https://www.nesacenter.org/uploaded/conferences/SEC/2010/teacher_handouts/EstablishingaProfessionalLearningCulture-1.pdf

³⁹ . Harpaz defines this as: 'An undermining question—a question that undermines the basic assumptions and fixed beliefs of the learners; casts doubt on the "self-evident," on "common sense"; uncovers basic conflicts lacking a simple solution; and requires thinking about the roots of things' (148) in: Yoram Harpaz. "Teaching and learning in a community of thinking." *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 45, no. 3 (2005), 136-157.

abilities, and save the country from helping me? Why do they stop me from working, and doing all the other things that make me feel part of the society?⁴⁰

Further on the Bishops ask us to engage in an act of remembering and humanity linked to mercy and justice:

Imagine arriving in a new country after fleeing persecution and enduring a perilous sea journey and, even though according to United Nations conventions you have the right to seek asylum, you are left languishing for years in a detention centre. That has been the experience of many asylum seekers under Australia's immigration processing arrangements...

Australian society as a whole needs to give more consideration to how we welcome the stranger. Many Australians have parents or grandparents who came to this country as strangers, which reminds us of our obligation to people who arrive on our shores, often vulnerable, traumatised and without resources.⁴¹

Artwork 6. "Memorial for Unborn Children" (Martin Hudáček) (2010)

Focus: Healing and mercy through the child that never was but eternally is

As an art student, Martin Hudáček from Slovakia was moved to create a sculpture to draw attention to the devastation abortion can bring to the woman, and to the fact that through the love and mercy of God, reconciliation and healing are possible.



Image 10 – 'Memorial for Unborn Children' by Martin Hudáček, 2010.
Permission granted by artist.

The sculpture shown here⁴² reveals a woman (left figure) in great sorrow grieving her abortion. The smaller figure on the right is the aborted child, presented as a young child, who in a very touching, healing way, comes to the mother, to offer contact, relationship, and forgiveness.

Note that the art work does not strive to adopt a moral position concerning the abortion – it simply seeks to show the viewer the aftermath of one event from different perspectives: the

responses of mother and potential child, and the mercy shown by God through the child to the mother through a gesture of reaching out or even blessing (one of many possible interpretations). The artist appears to leave remnants of red colouring within both figures,

⁴⁰ . Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. *Building Bridges: Social Justice Statements from Australia's Catholic Bishops, 1988 to 2013* (Alexandria: ACBC, 2014), 242 (hereafter ACBC); citing Leach & Mansouri. *Lives in Limbo: Voices of refugees under temporary protection*, 90-91.

⁴¹ . ACBC, "Building Bridges", 242-243.

⁴² . The image reproduced here is discussed at the LifeSiteNews.com site dated 2 April, 2012. It can be located at: <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/heart-rending-young-slovakian-sculptor-captures-post-abortion-pain-mercy-an>

possibly to demonstrate the suffering associated with such a traumatic event and perhaps also to link the entire narrative with the Passion of Christ.

As much seems to be echoed in the artist's own commentary on the work. Martin Hudáček has noted that the sculpture 'expresses hope which is given to believers by the One who died on the cross for us, and showed how much He cares about all of us.' In like manner, Pope Francis has called the Church to be and become an 'oasis of mercy' in a wounded and violent world. He prefers to understand 'mercy' in its present continuous tense as 'mercy-ing' – as an ongoing and active outreach to others.⁴³ On 21 October 2015 Martin Hudáček gifted to Pope Francis a small replica of 'Memorial for Unborn Children'.⁴⁴

Conclusion

What is the point of art? Is it 'useful' and 'effective'?

If someone offered you a set of teaching strategies, or a particular approach to pedagogy, that achieved some or all of the following, would you try to incorporate those into your school work, theological education or ministry? The assortment of claims made about this arts-based approach are:

1. They are languages that all people speak that cut across racial, cultural, social, educational, and economic barriers and enhance cultural appreciation and awareness.
2. They are symbol systems as important as letters and numbers. These pictorial systems teach us to wait and to be suspicious of "the one right answer".
3. They integrate mind, body, and spirit, and provide opportunities for every student to learn by processing materials in their own way;
4. They offer the avenue to "flow states" and peak experiences, but at the same time make students uncomfortable and unsure of any hasty certainties.⁴⁵
5. They develop both independence and collaboration.
6. They help students to tell stories, connect with beauty and wonder, and understand civilisation.
7. They make it possible to use personal strengths in meaningful ways and to bridge into understanding sometimes difficult abstractions through these strengths.
8. They improve academic achievement – enhancing test scores, attitudes, social skills, critical and creative thinking.
9. They exercise and develop higher order thinking skills including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, imagination, 'dwelling upon', and 'problem-finding.'
10. They are essential components of any alternative assessment program⁴⁶ – including an ability to provide balance between kataphatic and apophatic⁴⁷; fast and slow

⁴³ . Quotes and ideas from: Andreas Batlogg & Daniel Izuzquiza. (2015). A merciful Church for a wounded world. *Thinking Faith*. 4 December 2015, 1. Full article comprises 1-3.

⁴⁴ . Information about donation of replica to Pope Francis on 21 October 2015, retrieved on 16/5/16, can be found at: <http://www.martinhudacek.sk/20151021.html>

⁴⁵ . Note for example the words of UK artist Lucian Freud: 'The task of the artist is to make the human being uncomfortable'; retrieved on 17/5/16 from Donald Kuspit, 'Uncensored flesh' at: <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/kuspit/kuspit8-19-02.asp>

thinking⁴⁸; and a progression from instrumental to emancipatory and on to praxis and wisdom ways of knowing.⁴⁹

This of course is a shorthand and necessarily selective list of a range of responses that the arts can elicit. To return to this section's opening heading: the impact of the arts cannot be understood in terms of economically driven categories such as 'usefulness' and 'effectiveness'. The capacity of the arts to emancipate the human condition and help develop the full potential of the human being, like the values of justice, mercy and social well being themselves, can never be quantified. Perhaps it is only images that can convey the power of art. As the opening reflection on 'seeing' and 'worldview' argued, art can show us something 'up front' but it has hidden and elusive levels that can only be reached through deeper insight and an attitude of 'waiting upon'. Authors such as Egan have described this dynamic in terms of connected kataphatic and apophatic ways of seeing or knowing.⁵⁰

Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) is another who has captured this twofold complexity: 'Art is a step from what is obvious and well-known toward what is arcane and concealed'.⁵¹ German artist Max Beckmann (1884-1950) notes something similar:

What I want to show in my work is the idea which hides itself behind so-called reality. I am seeking for the bridge which leads from the visible to the invisible, like the famous cabalist who once said: "If you wish to get hold of the invisible you must penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible".⁵²



Image 11 - Celtic Christ, 29 May 2006, by Peter Mudge. Permission of the artist.

⁴⁶ . The source of these insights is: Dee Dickinson. 2012/1993. Why Are the Arts Important? (John Hopkins School of Education). Retrieved on 13/5/16 from: http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/Arts%20in%20Education/dickinson_why_arts.htm ; with some insights also from What is the purpose of art? – Quora, retrieved on 14/5/16 from <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-purpose-of-art>

⁴⁷ . Mudge, P. 'Towards a reclaimed framework of "knowing" in spirituality and education for the promotion of holistic learning and wellbeing – kataphatic and apophatic ways of knowing.' In M. de Souza, L. Francis, J. O'Higgins-Norman, and D. Scott. (eds.). *International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing*. Two Volumes. (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Academic Publishers, 2009), 611-629.

⁴⁸ . Claxton, G. *Hare Brain Tortoise Mind, How Intelligence Increases When You Think Less* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000).

⁴⁹ . Mudge, P. *Four ways of knowing: Instrumental, hermeneutical, emancipatory and praxis/wisdom. A proposed model for pedagogy, teaching/learning, knowing, assessment, reporting and evaluation, Abridged version. Unpublished paper* (Baulkham Hills/Pennant Hills, NSW: Transformative Pedagogies/BBI, 2012).

⁵⁰ . Harvey D. Egan. (1978). Christian apophatic and kataphatic mysticisms. *Theological Studies*, 39(3), 399-426.

⁵¹ . Cited in Hugh Moss. *The art of understanding art: A new perspective*. Illustrated by Peter Suart. (London: Profile, 2015), 37.

⁵² . Max Beckmann. *On my painting*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 11-12.

'The artists get there first'

Freud has famously quipped: “The artists get there first”⁵³ – they ‘see’ reality and reveal ‘the truth of a situation’ most honestly, imaginatively and accurately, often before others do. This includes not just painting but also music, literature, dance, architecture, and many other forms. The associations between art, justice, mercy and social wellbeing discussed in this article in relation to just six artworks would appear to support Freud’s contention.

Finally, as Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco has observed: ‘Justice and mercy either go hand in hand, each preparing the steps of the other, or they both limp along, groping in the fog.’⁵⁴ Without the lens of art, as one important vehicle for revealing the depths of mercy, we too might limp and grope through the fog, instead of walking upright by the light of a Merciful God.

And so we come full circle with these four key issues of art, justice, mercy and seeing. Without the light of a clear eye, providing the lamp of vision, all remains in darkness. As Jesus states in the Gospel of Matthew: ‘The eye is the lamp of the body. If your vision is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your vision is poor, your whole body will be full of darkness’ (Mt 6: 22-23, NRSV). If we can respond to justice, mercy and social wellbeing in this way through the arts, then perhaps we can cultivate the necessary conditions underscored in Psalm 85 for those whom we teach. This is a sacred place where:

‘Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.’ (Psalm 85:10, KJB).

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