‘Everybody needs beauty as well as bread’

An address by Martyn Agass given on 26 February 2017

I chose this theme for my service today when taking a short break in Snowdonia in the autumn. This adventure is something of a family tradition. When we were children my parents would usually include a day at the beach in our hill-walking itinerary and more often than not we would go to Black Rock Sands at Portmadoc. I hadn’t been there for years but on our last visit I decided to return. Of course, they say you should never go back. I was so surprised and saddened to see Portmadoc. My memories of sunshine, sea and gaiety were confronted by the reality of Portmadoc today: a drab urban vista incorporating the shops that occupy every high street in the country and an unmistakable air of bleakness and desolation. Somehow the cheerless ambience had been absorbed by the townsfolk who appeared bowed and sombre. My spirits sank. As Winston Churchill said: ‘We shape our buildings and our buildings shape us.’ Remarkably similar to the words of Frank Lloyd Wright – although he added a ‘Unitarian twist’! ‘We create our buildings and then they create us. Likewise, we construct our circle of friends and our communities and then they construct us.’

The power of the environment to determine our health is well-established. Over-crowding, lack of privacy, noise and air-pollution erode our well-being. Social cohesion is lost, civic pride collapses and the crime rate increases. Conversely well-kept streets, shared and welcoming communal spaces, trees, foliage and parkland all combine to lift our spirits. Psychologist’s advise us that colours can influence our mood too – so while blue has a calming effect, yellow encourages positivity and optimism. These attributes have been successfully incorporated into the design of ‘Maggie’s Cancer Care Centres’. Maggie Keswick Jenk’s distress on learning of the severity of her cancer was heightened by the ‘awful interior space’ where she received the unwelcome news. She resolved to change things and in so doing succeeded in creating environments endowed with light, greenery and space which welcomed and empowered visitors rather than treating them as victims. The Maggie’s centre in West London won the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2009.

Architects play a critical role in shaping our environment. They have the power to provide solace, to promote solidarity, to foster good health and to make us happier.

This is all very well but my contention today is that good art – in the broadest sense of the word – goes farther. It has the potential to touch us more deeply, to give us an understanding of ourselves and to nourish our spiritual lives too. Certainly art may produce things of great beauty. In his essay ‘What is Art?’, Tolstoy defined beauty as ‘something which pleases without evoking desire’. This presupposes the next question – what are the qualities in something that might please us? But I feel that this is a somewhat unrewarding avenue to explore as leads us to the issue of personal taste. In Tolstoy’s words: ‘there can be no explanation of what pleases one man and displeases another.’ I imagine that today we would invoke variations in our DNA, our environment and upbringing to explain these nuances of character.
‘Expression theory’ asserts that features of art can mimic or capture common facial, vocal or gestural expressions and in so doing can evoke feelings, emotions and moods. So in architectural terms the regularity and harmony of a structure, its colour and its compatibility with its immediate environment can induce a sense of calm and serenity within us. By contrast the brutalist style in hard unyielding monochrome concrete disturbs and shocks us.

Seen in this light, art at its most profound can be considered as a means of communication. Any of us looking at a building, for example, is entering into a relationship with the architect – we are engaging with his or her emotions and feelings. John Ruskin said: 'A good building must do two things, 'firstly, it must shelter us, and then secondly, it must also speak to us; speak to us of all the things that we think of as most important, and that we need to be reminded of on a day-to-day basis.'

Moreover our individual experience may accord with that of our fellows. This shared response need not be constrained by time – it may be equally applicable to our forebears or to generations yet to come. Here, we are I believe entering the realm of spirituality, envisioning art as a means of union – joining people one with another, invoking a sense of solidarity and shared understanding even though this may transcend time. This rapport is essential for our well-being and flourishing as individuals and equally indispensable for the spiritual life of man and of humanity.

The power of architecture to resonate with our sense of spirituality is old as man himself. The history of mankind is replete with examples from Stonehenge and the pyramids to the magnificent Christians cathedrals with their elaborate decoration dating from the Middle Ages or palaces such as the Alhambra. Arguably these buildings have more to do with the projection of power, whether divine or human, rather than spiritual enhancement of ordinary people. However, their very scale and grandeur can inspire a sense of awe and wonder and in so doing convey a dimension beyond the ordinary. Something bigger than ourselves.

The advent of the industrial revolution here in the United Kingdom gave philanthropic entrepreneurs, often quakers, the opportunity to put their principles into practice. Whilst the emphasis of model villages such as Saltaire, Port Sunlight, New Earswick and Bournville was an improvement in living conditions and physical comfort, the range of resources provided for these communities – schools, hospitals, libraries, reading rooms, public baths and recreational facilities – enabled the workers to lead richer more meaningful lives. These attributes together with the social cohesion fostered by these communities laid the foundation for individual and collective spiritual growth. The ‘Garden City Movement’ led by Sir Ebenezer Howard in 1898 bore a similar ethos though on a grander scale. He conceived of thoughtfully planned communities of several thousand people with defined areas for residential accommodation, industry and agriculture. Letchworth in Hertfordshire was the first of the Garden Cities. In retrospect they are regarded as only a partial success and I have no grounds for promoting them in terms of their influence on the spiritual direction of their citizens’ lives.

Whilst we can admire the beauty of the ‘arts and crafts’ architecture of the model villages of the late 19th century it remains a memorable exception despite the passage of another
century and many, many opportunities for emulation. These days we talk at length of inequality – between rich and poor, young and old, men and women, home-owners and renters. Discussions about poverty are conducted in terms of income and benefits, educational standards and housing but seldom acknowledge the innate ugliness of the poorer and deprived districts of our towns and cities. We pass through these whilst sitting on buses or behind the wheels of our cars, distracted by our thoughts or the music pouring into our ears from our smartphones. Money can buy us comfortable homes in appealing suburbs or villages, with well- tended gardens and affable neighbours and timely holidays. Those less fortunate members of our society in less favoured districts have no such respite and must contend with the depressing facades of uniform housing, litter, graffiti and unkempt gardens festooned with abandoned furniture and too often guarded by fierce and noisy dogs. Given these circumstances and the implicit feeling of entrapment, it is no wonder that the prevalence of psychiatric illness is higher in these communities. Perhaps too a more sinister underlying message is transmitted to the unfortunate residents. Namely - Is this how society regards us? Is this all we are worth?

In this context I would like to commend to you a marvellous speech made by John Hayes the Minister for Transport on 31st October last year entitled ‘The Journey to Beauty’ in which he lucidly articulates the case for beauty in our urban environment. He contends that the ‘overwhelming majority of public architecture built during his lifetime is aesthetically worthless, simply because it is ugly. In contrast he cites the architectural success of some railway stations, noting that St. Pancras and Paddington are ‘noble, serene and upright. The spaces open before you’. In similar vein he describes ‘the classical portico of Huddersfield station, the ecclesiasticism of Carlisle and the gentle gothic of Great Malvern.’ Transport and indeed all public architecture is by definition used by everyone. It is ever-present and has the potential to raise our spirits, to nurture us and to literally transport us from our humdrum existence to a more ethereal plane. It can be the starting point for our personal journey to spiritual well-being.

John Hayes contends that a change of mindset is required across the public sector and that it must ‘make aesthetics a matter of public policy’. Back in 1926 the first iconic red telephone box was introduced after fierce debate and a closely fought competition. The Royal Fine Art Commission was the ultimate arbiter of the contest and selected Sir Giles Gilbert Scott’s classic design – now recognized world-wide. If only we could imbue the debate about our forthcoming ‘Garden’ villages, towns and cities with the same concern. Can our planning system rise to the challenge? Why should elegant high streets with their supermarket signage tastefully constrained to a few scant letters mounted on brick or stone be confined to towns like Henley-on-Thames or Marlow? Shouldn’t we be striving to make every high street listed – beginning in Berinsfield and Blackbird Leys?

Let me give you an example albeit a rather sombre one. The turn of the 20th century witnessed the wonderful partnership of architect and gardener – Edwins Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. Their unlikely alliance resulted in the creation of perhaps the most beautiful English houses and gardens of all time. Unsurprisingly it was the wealthy that gained the immediate benefit of their legacy although every one of us can now visit, enjoy and admire many of them. Later in his life, Lutyen’s reputation resulted in him being awarded commissions for buildings of national importance. If you choose to visit some of military
cemeteries in Northern France you may be struck, as I was, by the beauty of those dedicated to the fallen English soldiers. At Bayeux for example each of the four thousand elegantly simple headstones is embellished by the most delightful miniature flower bed. This recapitulation of the shared vision of Lutyens and Jekyll is encapsulated for all time in homage to those ordinary men who lost their lives in those two dreadful conflicts that defined the last century.

Today everyone acknowledges our housing crisis. There is a relative lack of land available for development in these crowded islands and our planning system adds further constraints. The high cost of land mitigates against the use of good architects and reduces the budget available for the buildings themselves and their associated landscaping. It is imperative that we devise the means to encourage land owners to take a long term view and deter those who are tempted by a quick turnover and profit. More imagination is needed.

Clive Aslet, the editor of Country Life, has suggested that local authorities should buy retail parks perhaps in conjunction with pension funds or establish housing charities and then develop these sites for housing.

We are fortunate. Many of our religious buildings offer breath-taking architecture, wonderful craftsmanship and inviolable sanctity. As members of the Chapel Society we enjoy that benefit to the full – here in this magnificent building which takes pride in its lack of affiliation to any religious order. Towards the end of his life Frank Lloyd Wright concluded: ‘The longer I live the more beautiful life becomes. If you foolishly ignore beauty, you will soon find yourself without it. Your life will be impoverished. But if you invest in beauty, it will remain with you all the days of your life.’

For the sake of our children and those who follow us we must strive to suffuse our public buildings and spaces with all the sublimity that we possess. We must aim to enthrall and inspire all those who gaze at them with an invitation to explore that spirituality which transcends the generations and life itself.